THE INSPECTOR GEORGE GENTLY CASE FILES

GENTLY WHERE THE BIRDS ARE

Alan Hunter

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Alan Hunter was born in Hoveton, Norfolk in 1922. He left school at the age of fourteen to work on his father's farm, spending his spare time sailing on the Norfolk Broads and writing nature notes for the *Eastern Evening News*. He also wrote poetry, some of which was published while he was in the RAF during the Second World War. By 1950, he was running his own bookshop in Norwich. In 1955, the first of what would become a series of forty-six George Gently novels was published. He died in 2005, aged eighty-two.

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Gently Where the Birds Are

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For birdwatchers, and other men of peace

CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN DASHED up the track between the lines of tinting trees. He was sobbing as he ran and his feet were skittering in fallen leaves. Behind him ran another man: he was calling 'Come back you young idiot!' Both of them could hear the siren of a police car on the main road, a distant sound. There was nothing else to hear except the rustle of their pounding feet. The trees were remote and silent: old and tall in another autumn.

Among the trees a third man paused, hearing the sound of the running steps. His attitude was wary and he stood absolutely still. He wore, slung on his chest, an uncased camera, and at his side a pair of binoculars. He, too, heard the siren of the police car, which now seemed to be coming closer. He heard one man calling to another, but the words were indistinct. Then an anguished cry. Then a sharp crack, like the bursting of a paper bag. Then nothing except the fading siren and the clatter of wood pigeons disturbed from the treetops. They blundered through the twigs, dislodging leaves. The leaves flickered silently in the must-scented air.

* * *

Clearly it was going to be one of those cases which can leave a policeman a bit red around the ears.

'Sit down, Gently,' said the Assistant Commissioner. 'No doubt by now you'll have heard of the photograph.'

No doubt at all. Its fame had hit the grapevine that entwined the offices of New Scotland Yard, and in fact Gently had been one of the first to hear about it, having run into Pagram in reception.

'Someone has sent us a snap of a body . . .!'

'So what's unusual about that?'

'This one is anonymous, old top. It's got a message on the back in cut-out letters . . .'

That had been yesterday, and ever since rumours about the photograph had been afloat: it depicted an IRA job, a gang killing or was an apocryphal echo of the Great Train Robbery. Plenty of theories, but few facts. That photograph was evidently giving trouble. By now it must have been exhaustively processed yet still, apparently, without much progress.

'I've called you in for a reason,' the AC said. 'We'll come to that in a moment. How much do you know about this business?'

'Only what Pagram told me yesterday.'

'Then first you'd better see the photograph.'

He picked up a folder and handed it to Gently. It was fat with report sheets in several departmental hues. Gently opened it: the photograph faced him, tabbed to a card of manilla.

‘Take your time,’ the AC said. ‘I may as well tell you that we don’t know the subject. Let the trained brain roam over it, then come up with whatever strikes you.’

Gently gave it his attention. It was a print of good quality, taken with sunlight coming from the right. It depicted the body of a youngish man lying on a track between tall trees. The man appeared to have crumpled and fallen on his back, with his head tilted and in profile to the camera. A bullet wound showed clearly in his right temple and blood had flooded down the cheek on to fallen leaves beneath. Age? Possible mid-twenties. Height? Obscured by the posture. Colouring? Dark (it was a black-and-white print), features, smooth-skinned. He was wearing sports shirt, slacks and tweed jacket. The jacket had leather elbow-and-cuff protectors and exaggerated lapels. Shoes, brogues, rather worn, with above them a glimpse of a fancy sock. The track, or path, where the body lay ran straight ahead under the trees, ending within a couple of hundred yards, where the trees framed a section of sky. The trees were deciduous. The pale tones of the leaves suggested that the photograph was of recent origin. On the verso: THIS MAN IS DEAD, in capitals cut neatly from a newspaper.

Gently laid the folder open on the AC’s desk. ‘Probably taken on Saturday,’ he said.

‘Scintillating,’ the AC said. ‘Saturday was the only sunny day for a fortnight. What about the time?’

‘We’d need to know the alignment. It was either mid-morning or mid-afternoon.’

‘Your intuition doesn’t tell us?’

Gently grunted. ‘I was saving that for the victim! The jacket with the patching and the socks . . . I’d put him down as a townee dressed for the country.’

‘A Londoner.’

‘Possibly. A clerk or shop assistant. Someone not too flush with money.’

‘The jacket came from C & A.’

And that probably said it all.

‘I’ll just give you a rundown,’ the AC said. ‘You’ll find the envelope in the folder. Same lettering – it’s from a *Sunday Telegraph* – and the adhesive is Uhu glue. Smudges but no clear latents. Envelope and printing paper untraceable. Victim unknown to CRO Met., MIs 5 and 6, D of A and Missing Persons. Pathology says a ·22 bullet. Photograph taken within minutes of death. Bullet probably fired at close range, but exit wound out of shot.’ He paused. ‘Posted Monday at Eastwich, arriving here yesterday morning.’

‘At Eastwich . . .!’

‘Does that suggest something?’

Gently shook his head, eyeing the photograph. Eastwich, Plymouth, John o’ Groats, it was all the same to what was on that. ‘Just that it doesn’t begin to make sense.’

‘That point has also been taken, Gently.’

‘If the sender wanted anonymity, why post it in Eastwich when he might have posted it in town?’

‘Perhaps he couldn’t get to town.’

‘It smells fishy. We’d do better to start looking in Surrey or Sussex. Only the rest of it doesn’t make sense either, because why would he send us the print in the first place?’

The AC’s eyes were cold behind his glasses. ‘Are you suggesting that it’s a fake?’

‘Is there any reason to suppose it isn’t?’

The AC continued to stare but said nothing.

Yet a hoax was the only plausible explanation to that almost too-immaculate photograph . . . and there were comedians enough in town to brighten their lives by playing such pranks! The police were everyone's Aunt Sally: you kicked at their omniscience by taking a rise. And what better than a photograph of a freshly slain body, with blood still gushing from the fatal wound . . .?

'I mean . . . the taking of the photograph at all.'

'The pathologist has no doubts, Gently.'

'But what sort of chummie goes after his man with a gun in one hand and a camera in the other?'

'There could have been two men.'

'But still . . . why?'

The AC fidgeted. 'Blackmail has been suggested.'

'Can you imagine chummie standing back from the body while the blackmailer takes his picture?'

'Chummie may have cleared off.'

'But if the blackmailer was present he would have snapped chummie in the act.'

'Perhaps he did, and that may be the pay-off. Alerting us was just putting on the pressure.'

'I still think it's dodgy.'

The AC drew breath. 'Then I'm glad your mind is so open, Gently,' he said nastily. 'Because that brings me back to my reason for asking you to step round here. That postmark is our only clue, and you are familiar with the district. So by general request we are placing the can in your no-doubt capable hands.'

'You're dropping it on me . . .!'

The AC smiled tigerishly. 'Who else so qualified to field a hot one? And you may as well forget about Surrey and Sussex, because they're expecting you at Eastwich.'

And five seconds later, Gently was outside with the photograph hung firmly around his neck.

Leaves drifted through the chilling mist that clung to the tall trees. Leaves of copper, rust and lemon, and a few that were crimson. They rustled and tapped as they fell but landed as quietly as flakes of snow. The floors of the ancient wood were paved with them, where no foot went. But the track also was covered, and there a man hurried along. He looked neither to the right nor left and his feet rustled steadily through the drifts. At last he came to the edge of the trees. There the figure of a woman met him. For some moments they confronted each other, then she fell in his arms, sobbing. He spoke to her softly. Leaves fell near them. The woman controlled her sobbing. He took her arm, and they moved on. The mist all the while was thickening in the trees.

Happily Aspall, the Eastwich Inspector, was a man that Gently felt he could take to. Slow-spoken, rather heavy-featured, yet with a twinkle in his grey eyes. He'd been waiting at the station with a squad car to ferry Gently through the undistinguished streets; then, arriving at his office, he'd pressed a buzzer, when a pot of tea had been quickly brought in.

'The Yard filled us in with the details, sir . . .'

The tea they were sipping was reddish and sweet. Outside a frosty mist hung about the buildings and pedestrians were hunched, with their collars turned up.

'Have you a missing person who might fit?'

‘I’ve looked out a couple of possibles, sir.’

Together they gazed at the typed report forms, each with an amateurish snap of the subject. William Leslie Benhall, aged eighteen, three weeks missing from an address in the town; Terence Walter Virtue, aged forty, missing from an address in Woolbridge since June. Utterly unlike, yet sharing a certain fragility of expression, a feyness.

‘Anything like?’

‘Not in the slightest.’

Aspall shuffled them away. ‘Sir, I suppose your people do have a reason for thinking chummie is on our patch?’

‘Just the postmark.’

‘Not very much, sir.’

Gently shrugged and gulped tea. All the postmark was a label reading: Enter the haystack here.

‘Any reports that might help us – stolen guns, unusual occurrences?’

Aspall shook his head. Already he must be thinking that the visit was a waste of time.

‘Any comics with a taste for police-baiting?’

‘We’ve got our quota of those, sir.’

‘This one is bright. Probably owns a good camera.’

Aspall thought hard, but could only look glum.

Gently sighed. ‘Right, then . . . we may as well get to the prize exhibit!’ He took out the photograph. ‘You’re local, aren’t you?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘See what you can make of this.’

It was the scene in the AC’s office repeated. Aspall stared long and frowningly at the photograph. But you could tell from the first moment that it might as well have been a message in Linear B. No local knowledge was springing to his aid, no illuminating twitch of recall. At last he laid the photograph down and fingered his smooth chin.

‘This . . . happened on Saturday?’

‘At a guess.’

‘We had Manchester United here that day, sir.’

‘I hadn’t heard that they’d taken to guns.’

‘Well no . . . but they’re a rum old lot, sir!’

And perhaps it had been worth mentioning, with other ideas so far to seek. In fact, Gently remembered, there’d been twenty-one arrests, and one supporter had been carrying a razor.

‘The subject suggests nobody?’

‘I’m afraid he doesn’t, sir.’

‘But there must be woods like that around Eastwich.’

‘That’s the snag, sir – we’ve got too many, and a couple of Forestry holdings on top. Of course, we could doctor the print and circulate copies to the Forest Centres. But that might take a few days, sir. And all we’re working on is a postmark.’

‘That wood wasn’t planted by the Forestry.’

Aspall peered at the photograph again.

‘They’re certainly big trees . . .’

‘It’s a natural woodland. Some of those trees have seen three centuries.’

‘Perhaps it’s a park, sir.’ Aspall puckered his eyes. ‘A pity the print isn’t in colour.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘I don’t know, sir. Just the sky . . . something about it.’

They stared at the sky. It was evidently blue: the tone in the print declared it. On a still, sunny autumn day a brilliant, cloudless, autumn sky. Yet Aspall was right: there was something about it: almost as though it were *too* blue. From the tops of the trees that framed it to the track below it stretched in a single ungraduated panel . . .

Gently struck the desk.

‘It’s a *sea* sky!’

They stared at each other in quick interrogation. Yet plainly it fitted: to have a sky like that, you must needs have a sea under it.

‘Fetch me a map . . .!’

Aspall found one and spread it over the desk. The long coastline stretched wavily southwards from Lothing in the north to the Haverwich river. Marsh, cliff, heath and sandhills spread alternatively along the shore, with one tiny triangle of trees the tip of which reached the sea.

‘There . . .!’

They pored over it. At no other location did trees touch the shore. On low cliffs, by the village of Grimchurch, was the single incidence on the whole coast.

‘That’s got to be it, sir.’

Gently grunted. ‘Always provided we’re in the right county!’

‘We can soon check that, sir. One of our sergeants was born and bred in Grimchurch.’

‘Fetch him in.’

Aspall went out. For a moment, Gently gazed at the photograph. Then he tore a strip from a pad on the desk and placed it on the photograph, concealing the corpse. Aspall returned within the minute, towing a uniform man behind him.

‘Sergeant Scott, sir.’

Gently pointed to the photograph. ‘The Inspector thinks you may know that place.’

Scott looked the photograph over cautiously, as though suspecting there might be a catch.

‘Well?’

‘Why, yes sir. It’s the path through the Priory Wood at Grimchurch.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘I should be, sir. I did most of my courting along there.’

It was almost a disappointment in its comprehensive certainty. Within half an hour, out of all England, they’d put their finger on the very spot.

A thin, small wind came in from the sea, enough to waken the leaves from their silence. Here and there a leaf lifted from the track, twirled a few times and settled again. But nobody now walked in the wood. The man and woman, both had gone. If there were ghosts among the trees they passed lightly, disturbing no leaf. Only, in the topmost branches, clinging wearily, had appeared certain small green birds, perhaps blown in from the mist and the sea, their plumage fluffed by the dank chill. Others came. They called among themselves, their notes low and quick. Then, when they were rested, they began to hunt in the twigs for food.

CHAPTER TWO

ASPALL'S LIEUTENANT, SERGEANT Warren, drove the car that took them to Grimchurch. A trip of thirty miles, it led through undulating country to an area of heaths and pine plantations.

They drove with lights through a clinging mist that turned afternoon into evening, yet somehow accentuated the autumn colouring, so that trees stood out with an arresting distinctness.

Fields were dark brown from the plough, bracken a burning russet tint.

A Panda car waited at the turn to Grimchurch, which lay at a distance from the main road. Aspall introduced a Police Constable Campsey, a fresh-faced man with a handsome moustache.

'Your beat is Grimchurch . . .?'

'Yes sir.'

'Any incidents here lately?'

'Not what you might call incidents, sir. I did one of the residents for a traffic offence.'

'Any dubious characters?'

'I wouldn't say that, sir. They're a good class of resident at Grimchurch. A lot of them are retired, with a bit of money. Then there are business and professional people.'

'Quite a nice neighbourhood.'

'Yes sir. A lot of them come here for the birds.'

'For the what?'

'The birds, sir. We've got a big sanctuary at Grimchurch.'

Gently shrugged to himself – it checked! They were way out with the birds. A lot of people here would have excellent cameras, and likely one with a warped sense of humour. Perhaps even . . .

'Who was your traffic-offender?'

'The vicar, sir. He ran into a bread van.'

'A young man, is he?'

'No sir. He's given up driving since the accident.'

They drove on, the Panda leading, across a heathland fringed with birches, then through pines, where the bracken was yellow-green, and by a farm that looked out over marshes. A square flint church-tower appeared ahead.

'This is the village, sir,' Aspall said. 'Not much left of the place, these days. It slipped into the sea a long time back.'

There wasn't much left: just a bit of street with brick-and-flint-built cottages and houses, set at the foot of a wooded slope, with a view of marshes, beach and sea. The houses, though modest, looked well cared for. The largest stood at the end of the

street. Opposite was a pub, The Fisherman's Rest, and near by a lane departed to the beach. But it was a subdued, bereft-seeming place, with no one strolling in the street. The church, tucked away round a bend, seemed to have been added as an afterthought.

'Is this the whole of it?'

'Just about, sir. There are one or two houses on their own.'

And on their own they would certainly be, if this was the soul and focus of the parish.

'Let's get on.'

Aspall signalled to Campsey, and the two cars turned up a gradient by the pub. Almost at once they emerged from trees to pass under the bland stonework of monastic ruins.

'What's this?'

'The Priory, sir.'

A crumbling west-front overhung the roadway. Flint and freestone, it was pierced by a great window and by two point-arched doorways. Bullocks stared at them from the ruins: nettles and ragwort grew from the stones. Behind, turf sloped to a rim of vegetation, below which spread a grey sea.

'Which is the wood . . .?'

Aspall pointed. The wood flanked the grounds of the Priory to the south: a long reef of auburn trees, cut off abruptly at the cliff edge.

'And the sanctuary?'

'That's further on, sir, at the other end of the cliffs.'

'So you'd pass the wood going to it from the village.'

'Yes sir. But you wouldn't go through the wood.'

They drove a bendy road through fields and approached the wood at a sharp corner. Here a lane bore off left, and into the lane Campsey turned. It ended within a few hundred yards, beside a shut-up-looking cottage; and from the lane-end stretched the track that passed through the trees, towards the sea.

They got out and stood weighing it up.

Even now, there seemed plenty to doubt. The photograph had been taken in full sun, while what they saw here was dulled by mist. Many more leaves must have fallen from the trees, giving the wood a more open aspect, while a group of fly agaric fungi, some big as plates, had not been recorded in the photograph. Then there was the cottage . . .

'Who lives in that?'

'A young lady called Stoven, sir,' Campsey supplied. 'They tell me she writes poetry, but she's quite a nice young person, sir.'

'Does she live alone?'

'Yes sir. Came to live here at Easter.'

'Where's she from?'

Campsey shook his head. 'She isn't local, sir. That's all I know.'

Gently took out the photograph and they advanced slowly along the track. There was little that was readily identifiable about the tall trees bordering it. Oaks, turned a copper-auburn, elms, dusted with yellow-gold, beeches russet or copper-red, maples alight with glowing lemon: if the photograph had been in colour there would have been no problem in lining it up. As it was, the situation was classic: they couldn't see

the wood for the trees.

'Gather round, please.'

They gathered obediently.

'Now . . . each one concentrate on a single feature.'

Silently they gazed from photograph to trees, then back again from trees to photograph.

'Perhaps this bough, here . . .' Aspall hazarded.

'Those trunks, sir . . .' Warren muttered.

But it was Campsey who came up with something definite: 'Sir, I'd say that bush was a guelder rose!'

'Can you see one?'

'Yes sir. About twenty yards on your left. It's lost its leaves now, sir, but I reckon it's the one.'

They moved up to the bush. When it was leaved, it could well have been that featured in the photograph. And from this spot, though still vaguely, other components began to fall into place. Give or take a few feet, and they were standing where the body had lain . . .

'Let's see what we can find in these leaves.'

They spread out and began to search. Campsey armed himself with a stick, and shortly the others followed suit. But for what were they searching . . .? Bloodied leaves? The rain on Tuesday had taken care of them, while if the 'blood' in the photograph had been coloured glycerine, the hoaxers would probably have removed all traces . . . Crime or hoax, out here there'd have been time to do the job properly.

Aspall touched his elbow: 'Sir . . .'

He'd been searching along the side of the track. Teasing the leaves aside with his stick, he had uncovered a faint indentation.

'Do you reckon that's a tyre mark, sir?'

Gently viewed it: not impossible.

'It's just in this one spot, sir, like it might be if the car had parked here.'

'Then there should be three more to match it.'

'Yes sir.'

Aspall went to work again. He uncovered two more credible indentations: where the third should have been was a root. Well . . . so perhaps a car had parked there! Sergeant Scott had come courting this way, too. And perhaps the indentations were an accidental feature, being wistfully seized on by a hopeful policeman . . .

'Sir . . .'

This time it was Campsey, who had been prowling behind the bushes. What he'd found was a little tab of aluminium that presumably meant something to someone, somewhere.

'Do you recognize it?'

'No sir. But it was lying on top of the leaves.'

Gently sighed and found an envelope for it and solemnly marked it with identification.

It was getting dusk now, and piercingly chill. Soon they would have to call it off anyway. But having, alas, identified the spot, he couldn't avoid going through all the motions. Tomorrow there'd have to be a full-scale search and interviews with dozens of those nice people, while the photograph circulated innumerable police stations and negative report sheets collected in files . . .

In the fading light he walked up the track to the limit of the trees. The track ended appropriately at nothing: a fall had gouged out the cliff face below it. A slide of ninety feet of ochreish sand delta'd out on the beach beneath, old barbed wire hung across the gap, a yawing signboard warned: Danger. A track that went nowhere . . . except to a sea concealed in mist.

'Sir!'

It was Aspall again. The three of them were standing in a group; they were staring down at something, and Aspall's voice had an edge of excitement. Gently hastened back.

'Well . . .?'

'There, sir!'

He had to strain his eyes to see it. Partly trodden into the earth was a small, brass cylinder: a spent round of ·22 pistol ammunition. He stared at it distastefully.

'Mark the spot . . .'

Suddenly, their charade had become real.

Or had it . . . quite?

Even though Campsey found the bullet directly afterwards: it had lodged in the bark of an oak opposite, simply waiting to be collected?

Because – and this was what had bothered Gently all along – how could one account for what had happened there? Given facts, one could usually form a picture, but in this case the facts remained inscrutable.

The shooting, for example! It had been at close range, and the victim must have been aware of his danger. Yet apparently he hadn't as much as turned his head, let alone ducked or tried to knock up the gun.

Had he been blindfolded? An execution . . .?

Then there'd been the photograph, a few seconds afterwards!

And the posting it from Eastwich, leaving a clue dangling that in effect had led the police straight to the spot . . .

Almost, you were driven to labelling it a hoax, though the shell and the bullet offered silent contradiction. Yet couldn't they have been a plant too, an ingenious flourish to an essay in police-baiting . . .?

They tramped sombrely back to the cars.

'You'll want the usual action, sir?' Aspall enquired.

Gently hesitated, then shook his head. 'No. We'll give it twenty-four hours.'

Aspall also paused, before nodding. 'It's a tricky one, sir.'

'I'm glad you appreciate it.'

'Yes sir. What I reckon this case needs now is a body.'

Gently grunted. 'That's for tomorrow! What it also needs is a witness.' He gestured to the cottage. 'I make that two hundred yards from where a gun was fired on Saturday.'

'Let's pay a little call, sir.'

But the cottage was unlit, and the chimes within echoed hollowly. A glance through the window of the garage established that the car, if there had been one, was absent.

'She was here yesterday, sir,' Campsey said. 'I saw her in the lane as I drove by.'

'Has she friends in the village?'

'I daresay, sir. But I couldn't tell you who.'

Could she have skipped . . .? The cottage looked so forlorn in the frost and gathering twilight: dull red brick, without ornament, and pantiles on which the leaves were collecting.

'Keep an eye open for her, will you?'

'Yes sir,' Campsey said. 'She's often about in the village. I don't reckon she's far away.'

They drove back to Eastwich with their lights cutting the mist. No one said much. Gently confining himself to outlining familiar routine. By the morning they'd know a few things about guns and perhaps have some useful pointers from Campsey. Then they'd move in . . . twenty-four hours before they officially treated it as murder.

On his desk, when he got back to town, he found a memo from the Assistant Commissioner: Congratulations – keep it moving!

He crumpled the note into his waste bin.

CHAPTER THREE

BUT IN THE morning they knew only a little more than they had done the evening before. Nobody in Grimchurch held a gun permit, and the barrel-prints on the bullet were not on record. Of the latter the report had hazarded: Possibly fired from a target-pistol, against which Aspall had checked on the local gun clubs and found none that used pistols closer than Chelmsford. Campsey, meanwhile, could only report that Miss Stoven had not returned to her cottage.

'All a bit negative, sir,' Aspall conceded, as they discussed it in his office. 'Though if the gun used was a target-pistol, I'd say it favoured the idea of a hoax.'

'Target-pistols can kill too.'

'Oh quite, sir. But somehow it gives it an amateur flavour. Perhaps laddie only dreamed up the idea when he found he could borrow a gun.'

Gently shrugged. Nothing was impossible. And of course, he didn't have to borrow it locally.'

'That's right, sir. We were thinking it was odd, him risking posting the photograph from Eastwich. More like he'd come from town.'

'Him and a colleague.'

Aspall nodded, his eyes calculating. 'Somehow they'd got to know about Grimchurch, and reckoned that was the place for the job.'

All on the basis of a guess from the lab . . .! Almost, Aspall was seeing those two young men – a couple of students, like as not, with Marx and McLuhan in their pockets.

'And where does Miss Stoven fit into this?'

'Well, they could be friends of hers, sir.'

'And yet they would do it on her doorstep?'

Aspall said nothing. But he wasn't discouraged.

In one respect at least today was a brighter prospect than yesterday. After some hesitation, the sun was glimmering through the mist. And by now that photograph would be going the rounds, perhaps throwing up names to be checked out, while an artist's impression of the subject was being hawked around Grimchurch.

If only one could take the business seriously!

But Aspall had put his finger on it: no body.

'Who have you got out there?'

'Warren and six men, sir. One of the men is a dog-handler. But I had a photographer out earlier and the prints have just come in.'

He produced them: a painstaking record of the scene with the shell and bullet represented by markers. The photographer had also had a try at the indentations, but only one of them showed up clearly.

'Come on then. We'd better show our faces.'

Aspall rose with a show of alacrity. No doubt he was still engrossed by his comfortable, if diaphanous, theory.

A minibus and a van were parked in the lane by the cottage, and down the track they could see Warren in conversation with the dog-handler. He came up as they got out.

'Nothing to report yet, sir.'

So far they'd found a cache of rusted tins, a bald tyre and the carcass of an antique refrigerator.

'How much ground have you covered?'

'Most of the wood, sir. We'll be through there in an hour.'

'Take in the foreshore and the grounds of the Priory. What's the other way?'

'Heath, sir.'

'Cover that too.'

Warren went. From the depths of the wood they could hear faint rustlings and cracklings. For the rest, a great peace hung over the scene. Grimchurch had yet to wake up to their activities.

'Where do you reckon the girl could have gone, sir?'

Aspall was eyeing the cottage with a certain frustration. It presented a more attractive picture this morning, in the mild, misty sunshine. The garden was neat. A hedge of fuchsia still hung with crimson and blue blossom, and behind the cottage rose two huge elms, their twining boughs naked of leaves.

'People do go off on trips.'

'It's a bit coincidental, sir.'

'No doubt Campsey will get a fix on her.'

'A pity we can't get a look in the cottage.'

Was he expecting to find the body in there? Perhaps it wasn't such a far-fetched notion. If indeed there had been a body down the track, then the cottage was the handiest place of concealment. And then the occupant and her car go missing . . . Yes, the cottage might bear inspection.

'Let's take a look round.'

'You bet, sir.'

Aspall led the way through the wrought-iron gate. Crazy-paving stretched to the porch with, on either side, small lawns and rose beds. One of the latter had been freshly forked: Aspall stared at it with interest. But the roses had clearly not been disturbed and were, in fact, still blooming. Gently rang, to hear again the chimes sound unanswered. He tried the door: locked. A letter caught in the slit was a telephone account. Meanwhile Aspall had peeked round the back.

'Sir! Come and look at this.'

He was gazing at a kitchen garden backed by a few leafless fruit trees. There were rows of cabbages, some runner beans caught by the frost and awaiting clearance, two rows of spinach intercropped with radish, and a newly made seed bed. The latter was staked with two canes, on one of which was spiked a seed packet.

'Broad beans my eye – who sets them in November?'

'Read the directions on the packet.'

Aspall did – and grunted. The broad beans were earlies.

'All the same, sir, it could be a blind . . . that bed is about the right size.'

'We'll bear it in mind.'

'In the Red Farm job, sir, chummie planted a tree over the body . . .'

There was nothing else for them in the garden. The kitchen door was secure like the other. Peering through windows, they could see a neat interior, pleasantly furnished, but no bodies. It was indeed an innocent cottage, where a solitary young lady might scribble her poetry: in a bookcase Gently could recognize Robert Gittings' *Keats*, and near it a run of *Georgian Poetry*.

They were still peering through the windows when a quick exclamation made them turn. A tall young man in a zip-up jacket stood regarding them with indignant eyes. He wore a pair of binoculars slung across his chest and a Pentax camera hung at his side. His face was red as he demanded angrily:

'What the *hell* are you doing at the Dryad's cottage?'

His tone, though hectoring, carried an overtone of apprehension. He was a pleasant, square-featured young man, with nose a little snub, and frank eyes. He had slightly curled, warm-brown hair and a sturdy, active bearing. His feet were shod in muddy Dreadnoughts; he couldn't have been older than eighteen.

'At *whose* cottage?' Gently asked mildly.

'The Dryad's – Ka Stoven's!'

'Are you keeping an eye on it for her?'

'Never mind about that. What are you doing here?'

'We were hoping to talk to her.'

'Yes – it looks like it! Prowling round the back and staring in the windows.'

'Perhaps you can tell us where to find her.'

'Perhaps – if it's any of your business.'

But his self-confidence was leaking away as he stood supporting their interested scrutiny. The hot flush on his face remained and his indignant stare was beginning to falter. In an effort to maintain the pose he dug his hands deep in his jacket pockets.

'Are you a friend of hers?'

'Yes – I am.'

'We are police officers who want to talk to her.'

'Show me your warrant, then!'

Gently showed it. The young man stared at the card fiercely.

'Well?'

'I still don't understand why you're poking round here like burglars.'

'That's our privilege. Where can we find her?'

The young man bit his lip. 'I don't *know!*'

His eyes were sullen now, looking past Gently, and his hands dragged at the jacket. His mouth was firmly compressed as though any slackening might admit a tremble. 'What's your name?'

'I – I'm Dick Middleton.'

'I take it you live in the village?'

'Of course – at The Purlins. My father is the town architect at Eastwich.'

'That's right, sir,' Aspall muttered. 'Claude Middleton. I know him.'

'And do you work in Eastwich?'

'Well, I'm studying surveying. I happen to be working at home this week.'

Gently nodded. 'But today you're not studying.'

'It's up to me when I do it!'

'Instead, you took a walk to Miss Stoven's cottage.'

'I took a walk, that's all.'

‘But why did you come here?’

‘*Why shouldn’t* I come here? It’s as good a place for birdwatching as any. And for all I knew, Ka was back – she never goes away for long.’

‘Didn’t she tell you when she’d be back?’

‘No. She didn’t tell anyone.’

‘She just . . . went?’

His lips shut tight, and he stared hard at the bedraggled roses.

‘Anyway, you seem to know her well,’ Gently said. ‘And you’ve been at home all the week. I daresay you were out here earlier. When was the last time you saw her?’

‘I . . . Tuesday.’

‘You saw her then.’

‘Yes, I said so! Tuesday afternoon.’

‘Where?’

‘It was here in the garden. I – I’d been birdwatching in the wood.’

‘With your camera of course.’

‘Not with my camera! It was too dull on Tuesday.’

‘But there was plenty of sun on Saturday.’

The hands dug hard into the pockets.

‘So,’ Gently said. ‘You were here on Tuesday, and you saw Miss Stoven in her garden. Apparently she was about to go off on a trip. Wouldn’t she have mentioned that to you?’

‘Well, she didn’t.’

‘Yet you know her quite well?’

‘I . . . I . . . she’s a friend of the family! She knows my sisters, my people. I’m not her particular friend.’

‘Still, you show concern about her.’

‘All right – I *like* Ka!’

‘So wouldn’t she tell you about her plans?’

His arms were stiff as piston-rods. ‘Look – you don’t *know* Ka – she’s an odd sort of person. You can’t tell what she’s going to do.’

‘She is unpredictable.’

‘Yes – more than that! She seems to live on a different plane. Perhaps because she’s a poet, I don’t know. But that’s why she fascinates people.’

‘Which people?’

‘Oh, everyone. They think she’s someone rather special. My family does, anyway – and Lionel, and Phil.’

Gently glanced at Aspall, who shrugged. ‘Perhaps we should get some names down,’ Gently said. ‘This unusual young lady may have confided to someone else.’

‘But I tell you, nobody knows where she is.’

‘I’m afraid we have to make our own inquiries.’

‘But what’s it all *about!’* the young man burst out.

‘We can talk about that in the car.’

But in the car Gently changed his mind and ordered Aspall to drive to the village. Dick Middleton was loud in his objections, but Gently brushed them aside.

‘Isn’t your family at home?’

‘My mother, but—!’

‘We shall be talking to her anyway. Where are your sisters?’

‘Rory’s at work and Di’s at school in Wolmering.’

Then he shut up, sitting sprawled in his corner, his eyes averted and resentful.

The Purlins was the house on the corner, where the lane ducked down to the beach. Like its neighbours it stood close to the road, and was fronted only by a paved area and tubbed shrubs. But unlike the others it had been enlarged. At the rear was a considerable modern addition, with two levels of flat roof, of which the lower was adapted as a sun deck. Both the old and the new were crisp and fresh-painted; across a gravelled yard stood neat outbuildings. From the sun deck one would have a view over a tennis lawn to the beach and coastline, curving away towards Wolmering.

A creeper-covered porch faced the street, and Aspall parked the car by it. Dick Middleton jumped out and made to enter, but Gently pushed him back and rang the bell. The door was opened by a short, Pekinese-faced woman who stared at the policemen in surprise.

‘Why – Dick! Who have you brought here?’ Her voice had a slight accent.

‘We’re police officers, ma’am,’ Gently said quickly. ‘We’re making some inquiries in the village.’

‘Yes, they’re inquiring about the Dryad, mother!’ Dick Middleton broke in. ‘I found them poking around her cottage. Then they grabbed me and brought me back here – perhaps they’ll tell *you* what’s going on.’

‘The Dryad . . .!’

‘Yes – the Dryad! And this man comes from Scotland Yard.’

Mrs Middleton gazed helplessly at Gently.

‘If we could please come in, ma’am?’ Gently said.

She made a little resigned gesture and stood aside for them to enter. Then she ushered them down a hall into a large-windowed lounge that faced the sea. It was a graceful room, decorously furnished. A few pleasant oil paintings hung on the walls; a tall bookcase contained modern fiction and books of travel and biography. Dick Middleton divested himself of camera and glasses and threw himself down on a chair in the window. His mother waved the policemen to chairs, then sat on a settee facing them.

‘Now. What is all this about the Dryad?’

‘We wish to contact her,’ Gently said shortly.

‘It’s more than that if you ask me,’ Dick Middleton interrupted. ‘They’ve got some stupid idea about her.’

‘Dick, be quiet!’ his mother said sharply. ‘I imagine this gentleman knows what he’s doing. All the same, I am very much surprised that the police are interested in Ka.’

‘Your son tells me you are well acquainted with her,’ Gently said.

‘Yes, we are. Which is why I’m surprised. She is a little unusual perhaps, but a charming girl. What has she done?’

Gently shrugged. ‘She’s disappeared.’

‘Oh? And can that be such a crime?’

‘We wish to interview everyone in Grimchurch, and that naturally includes Miss Stoven.’

Mrs Middleton surveyed him with eyes that were faintly protuberant. ‘This is all very strange,’ she said. ‘I think that Dick may be right and that you have got ideas about Katherine.’ She glanced at her son. ‘Where has she gone?’

‘I simply *don’t know*, mother!’ Dick Middleton exclaimed. ‘I can’t tell you any

more than I can them. She must have cleared off after I saw her on Tuesday.'

'Dick, you would know if anyone does.'

'Well, I *don't.'* The young man flushed to his ears. 'And anyway, why should I know more than the others? She's as much with them as she is with me.'

His mother stared at him but said nothing.

'When did you last see her, ma'am?' Gently asked.

'I? Oh, one evening last week. It was Thursday – firework night. We had a barbecue in the summer house.'

'She said nothing to you?'

'Not about leaving. Afterwards we came in to watch television. Then Dick saw her off – she has a little car – Japanese, I think.'

'Has she ever mentioned her relatives to you?'

'Yes. She has a mother living in London. Her father died about a year ago. I believe it upset poor Ka a lot.'

'Have you the mother's address?'

Mrs Middleton shook her head. 'But I'm sure it's an address in Wimbledon. Ka comes from there. Her mother has remarried, and Ka would have said if she'd left the district.'

'What name?'

'I don't think Ka mentioned it.'

'Nor to me either,' Dick Middleton said. 'Everyone pretends I'm so thick with Ka, but she doesn't let on much to me.'

His mother's bright eyes rested on him again. 'But you still haven't told us what it's about,' she said to Gently. 'If you're interviewing everyone in Grimchurch, it can't be because Ka isn't at home.'

Gently nodded to Aspall, who handed him a copy of the artist's impression of the man in the photograph. Gently held it up so that Mrs Middleton could see it but her son could not.

'We are trying to trace this man,' he said, speaking rapidly. 'He was last seen at Grimchurch on Saturday. He was seen in the vicinity of Miss Stoven's cottage, at a time we can now estimate with accuracy. Do you recognize him?'

Mrs Middleton stared at the sketch with wide eyes. Her son jumped up as though he'd been stung and came to stare with her.

His face had gone pale.

'No,' Mrs Middleton said. 'I don't recognize him. Who is he? What's he done?'

Her son slid into a chair near her: Gently pushed the sketch towards him.

'But you recognize him – don't you?'

'No. I've never met him!'

'But you've *seen* him.'

'I tell you I haven't! And I don't believe he was seen near the Dryad's cottage.'

Gently paused. 'And why not?'

'Because . . . what would a stranger be doing out there? It stands to reason. It would make more sense if he'd been seen at the reserve . . .!' Now he was flushing.

'Yet he was seen there.'

'Then it can't be anything to do with Ka.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because she wasn't there – she was down at the hide with Phil.'

‘When?’

The young man gulped. ‘I don’t know – most of the day!’

‘Phil is the bird warden,’ Mrs Middleton explained smoothly. ‘He’s great friends with Ka. She’s a keen birdwatcher. No doubt Phil can tell you what Ka was doing on Saturday.’

‘Were you at home that day, Mrs Middleton?’

‘I! I was at home in the morning. In the afternoon Claude – that’s my husband – and I drove into Wolmering to shop. Why do you ask?’

‘We shall be asking everyone. Now I’d like to ask your son.’ Gently turned his stare on the latter. ‘A full statement of your movements on Saturday, if you please.’

Dick Middleton stared back frowningly, but couldn’t maintain the exchange for long. His colour was coming and going and his pink hands were restless.

‘After breakfast I wrote up notes . . . then I went round to Lionel’s.’

‘Who is Lionel?’

‘Lionel Easton. He lives at Sandlings, on the way to the reserve.’

‘The Eastons are friends of ours,’ Mrs Middleton enlarged. ‘Cosmo Easton and Cora. He’s a director of Easton Flour Mills in Eastwich. Lionel is Dick’s age. They’re great friends.’

‘And this house – Sandlings – just where is it?’

‘It’s down Heath Lane,’ Dick Middleton said.

‘In fact, you would pass Miss Stoven’s cottage on the way there?’

‘You pass her lane end . . . but I didn’t call in.’

‘Carry on.’

Dick Middleton shuffled his feet. ‘Well . . . I spent the morning with Lionel. He . . . he’s keen on taxidermy. He was skinning a waxwing he’d picked up somewhere.’

‘You mean he goes shooting?’

‘No – of course not! No one round here uses a gun. But sometimes you find dead birds and animals – and people bring them to him. They know he’s interested.’

‘Does your friend also study in Eastwich?’

‘He’s studying accountancy and company law,’ Mrs Middleton said. ‘At his father’s business. But you’ll quite likely find him at home if you want him.’

‘Thank you,’ Gently said. ‘I probably shall. And is he also a keen photographer?’

‘Oh yes. Him and Dick. Lionel has his own darkroom.’ Dick Middleton’s face was hot. ‘We’re not the only people mad on cameras. That’s why a lot of them come here, just to photograph the birds.’

‘There are other darkrooms in the village?’

‘Well . . . yes, I daresay there are! Anyway, you see plenty of cameras. Really expensive ones, too.’

‘Like your own.’

‘That’s just a . . . good one. Some people spend over a thou.’

He snatched it up and fiddled with it, his face bent low. His mother watched him curiously, her slanted brows frowning.

‘So you spent the morning with your friend.’

‘Yes. Then I drove home for lunch.’

‘You have a car?’

‘I’ve got a Mini. There isn’t a bus service into town.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well . . . after lunch, I went back again to Lionel’s.’

‘Still without calling at the cottage.’

‘Yes! I’m not always chasing after Ka. And then . . . well, I spent the afternoon with him . . . talking and that sort of thing. And when I got back mother was home, and we all spent the evening here.’

‘You seem to have spent most of the day at Sandlings.’

‘Yes, I did! Is that so strange?’

‘And all the afternoon talking.’

‘Don’t you ever talk to your friends?’

Gently hunched. ‘It seems a wasted opportunity for such a couple of keen photographers. Saturday was the only sunny day last week. Did neither of you pick up a camera?’

‘As it happens we didn’t!’ He snapped the camera-case shut and dropped the instrument back with the glasses. His hands were quivering; his fresh young mouth was held in a tight line. His mother spoke.

‘Superintendent, why exactly are you interested in cameras?’

Gently got up and walked to the windows and their spreading view of sea and coast. On a far-off horn the white houses of Wolmering were chalked lightly in the weak sun, above them the white stump of the lighthouse and the grey stump of the church. The sea, greyly yellow, made an indistinct horizon, and only a single longshore fishing boat was bobbing its way towards the harbour. Gently gazed for several moments. Then he turned back into the room.

‘We are interested in cameras because we are interested in a photograph. It depicts the man whose face you have seen and was taken on Saturday near Miss Stoven’s cottage. We wish to find that man and to identify the person who took the photograph.’

‘And . . . you think that Dick took it?’

‘Will you ask him if he did?’

Mrs Middleton’s protuberant eyes searched his. She hesitated uncertainly before turning to her son.

‘Dick – did you?’

He blurted it out: ‘No!’

‘Then ask him if he knows who did.’

Mrs Middleton asked him. He jerked his head with a snatch of violence.

‘No!’

CHAPTER FOUR

'BUT HE DID though,' Aspall grunted disgustedly, as they got back into the car. 'Sir, he was lying his head off. He's our chummie for the photograph.'

Gently stuffed his pipe with Erinmore. 'And the body?'

'That'll be his pal up the road. If the lady doesn't recognize the picture, it's a bad picture, or she doesn't want to.

Gently lit up and puffed a few times. 'Somehow, I've a notion it won't be so simple.'

'But what were they doing all the afternoon, if they weren't faking the photograph?'

'They were up to something, no doubt.'

'They were out in the wood, sir, setting it up. They knew the girl was down at the reserve, and there'd be no one else to see them, out there.'

'Did young Middleton strike you as a joker?' Gently asked.

'Maybe not, sir. But you can't tell. And it could be his pal who's the ringleader, who thought it smart to send us the picture.'

'To me he seemed such an earnest young man.'

'He needn't have known what his pal was up to.'

'Not a practical joker . . . and a hopeless liar. But a lad who might tell lies to cover for a friend.'

'Sir . . .?'

Gently nostrilled smoke. 'Dick Middleton loves Katherine Stoven.'

'You think she's in it too?'

'She seems involved in some way. And it doesn't have to be a practical joke.'

Aspall frowned through the wreaths of Erinmore: he involuntarily dropped his window. 'I'm afraid I don't see it like that, sir. There's too much pointing the other way.'

'You mean their sending us the photograph.'

'Yes sir. And them taking it in the first place.'

Gently nodded. 'That's a curious feature . . . though once it was taken, anyone could have sent it.'

'Like someone pinching it off them, sir.'

'Or like someone experiencing a twinge of guilt. Not enough to nudge them into a confession, but enough to urge them into a gesture.'

Aspall looked doubtful. 'I still don't see it, sir. Young Middleton doesn't strike me as a villain, either. And I reckon we can prove it straight off if his pal turns out to be the one in the photograph.'

Gently's grin was slow. 'You're betting on that?'

'Yes sir, I am.'

‘Then let’s get moving. Because young Middleton will be on the phone this very minute.’

* * *

Heath Lane was a narrow thoroughfare signed with the National Trust oak leaves. It ran between high hedges of berried hawthorn and field maple. Through gaps one glimpsed fresh-turned ploughland, and beyond that heather-dark heath. On the sea side stretched a rough pasture, edged by bushes along the cliff-line. Then a grove of tall trees rose on the left, with below them a handsome pair of gates.

‘This must be it, sir.’

Their wheels crunched on gravel. A short drive wound through the trees. They came out on a wide sweep before a four-square, red-brick Edwardian house. It had the rather dreary appearance of having been expanded from a design for something smaller, with oversize windows and doors and enormous chimney breasts and gables. But clearly it signified money.

‘Easton Mills must be flourishing.’

‘Yes sir. They’re pretty big business. They’ve got a big installation down at the docks.’

Aspall parked. They climbed broad steps to an iced-cake porch and the huge door. Gently rang, producing low chimes somewhere deep in the muffled interior. No one answered.

‘Do you reckon he’s hopped it . . .?’

Gently rang again, with like result. No sound issued from that overlarge house with its polished windows and velvety paintwork. But then a step sounded on the gravel.

‘Sir. . .!’

A figure had appeared at the corner of the house. It was that of a dark-haired youth, clad in jean overalls. And he didn’t look like the one in the photograph.

* * *

‘You wanted someone?’

He came forward jauntily, with a smile in his brown eyes. He was a slim youngster, not so tall as Middleton, but with an easy confidence about him. His hands were greasy and he carried a spanner; there was a smear on his narrow but well-turned features. He spoke in an agreeable, cultivated voice, and seemed rather to welcome the interruption.

‘I’m afraid there’s no one here but me. If you want my father he’s in Eastwich. Mother is out visiting, and it’s the domestic’s day off. What did you want?’

‘Are you Lionel Easton?’

‘Yes, of course. At your service.’

‘We are police officers.’

‘Jolly good. We’re always at home to the law.’

Was he ribbing them? It was difficult to tell; he had such an attitude of cheerful complaisance. He stood regarding them alertly, jogging the spanner in his hand.

‘No doubt your friend Dick Middleton will have explained our business.’

‘Dick? I haven’t seen Dick today.’

‘He would have rung you.’

‘But I wouldn’t have heard him. I’ve been working in the garage most of the morning.’

‘Most of the morning?’

‘Come and see. I’m giving the passion-wagon a tune-up.’

He made a gesture of invitation with the spanner and turned to lead them round the house. Gently glanced at Aspall, who shrugged blankly, and they followed on behind. At the back of the house they came to a courtyard enclosed on two sides by outbuildings. The double doors of one of these stood open to reveal an ancient MG sports car.

‘Meet Floradora. She’s one of the family. My father drove her from new. He used to have a handlebar moustache, you know. He flew Mozzies during the war.’

‘So what are you doing to her?’

‘I thought I’d give the valves a bit of a birthday.’

‘Just thinking about it took you most of the morning?’

‘Well – you don’t rush things with Floradora!’

But it was plain that no work was in progress on that pram-like, narrow-tyred vehicle. One half of the bonnet, folded back, revealed the head and valve-cover still bolted in place. Just window-dressing. And the smiling-faced youngster seemed not at all dismayed that Gently had rumbled him . . .

‘You’ll know what I’m going to ask you, then.’

‘It could be I have a rough idea.’

‘So you may as well strip off those overalls.’

Easton meekly obeyed, and hung them up on a nail.

‘Now – what about it?’

‘Well, Dick *was* here. I can’t tell you very much more than that. He came up in the morning, when I was skinning the waxwing, and then again in the afternoon.’

‘Straight after lunch?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘And stayed until when?’

‘Oh, teatime, thereabouts. He set off back before dark.’

‘So he’d be walking?’

Lionel Easton hesitated, then smiled apologetically. ‘Actually I didn’t see him leave. It’s quite possible that he had his car.’

‘What were *you* doing, then?’

‘Me? I was probably stuck in front of the telly. I don’t watch the Town very often, but of course I’m always keen to hear the results.’

‘And you two spent the afternoon at the telly?’

‘Good heavens no. Much too draggy.’

‘So?’

He paused. Then, his face quite blank, said: ‘Some of the time we spent in the darkroom.’

His face was blank: but he couldn’t entirely hide the gleam in his eye. Aspall, to judge from his expression, would dearly have loved to hit the young man. Perhaps Lionel Easton was conscious of it; he chose that moment to pick up a rag and begin scrubbing his hands.

‘Where is this darkroom?’

‘In the butler’s pantry. At least, that’s what we call it.’

‘Perhaps we can see it.’

‘Why not? Are you a camera-vulture too?’

With apparent enthusiasm he led the way to a door at the back of the house. It admitted them to a hall and the instant blanket of central heating.

'This way.'

At the end of a passage they entered a dimly lit room. Lionel Easton pressed a switch: twin neon tubes flooded light.

'Now – what can I show you? As you can see, we're not short of equipment.'

That was evident. Expensive apparatus ranged along a bench and overflowed on tables. By a deep sink were stacked developing trays along with a regiment of glass-stoppered jars. Over the sink and the bench hung red lights. The room smelled strongly of hypo.

'Where's your printing paper?'

'In the cupboard.'

The cupboard was stuffed with yellow boxes. Among them was paper of the size of the print they'd been sent, but alas, the brand was of the commonest.

'What were you developing on Saturday?'

'Some photographs that Dick took from the hide. We specialize in avocets, did you know that? Also a couple of shots of a buzzard.'

'Show me the negatives.'

He shook his head. 'I'm afraid Dick took them with him. But I can show you some of mine. I've got a fine selection of waders.'

He produced them all too readily, a fresh batch from a rack. All of birds, except a spoiled frame that appeared to be a close-up of foliage.

'What's that?'

'It should have been a Red Admiral, but I seem to have bungled the focus. I wasn't able to measure it, of course.' He smiled his apologetic smile.

Was it worth a search warrant? The odds were long that the negative had been destroyed – would be, now, in any case, before the warrant could be served! To prevent it they'd have to arrest him and his friend Middleton besides, with a likelihood that the only charge would be one of hoaxing the police . . . And yet . . .

'How much did your friend tell you?'

'I haven't admitted he told me anything.'

'Let's stop the fooling! You were expecting us. He was on the phone directly we left. You know about the photograph. Unless I'm much mistaken, it was you who posted it in Eastwich. You've had your fun, and you've sense enough to know that it's time to call it a day.'

Lionel Easton's eyes were round with innocence. 'Are you accusing me of something?'

Gently snorted disgust. 'Can't you see that you're wasting a lot of people's time? Your stupid joke had to be investigated, along with other things that weren't jokes! Now it's gone far enough. It's time you woke up and showed a bit of responsibility.'

'But I know nothing of any . . . joke!'

The nuance was faint, but was unmistakable. And Lionel Easton's eyes were momentarily anxious, as though he'd realized he'd made a slip.

'Show him the picture!'

Aspall got out the sketch. Lionel Easton examined it without a tremor.

'That's rather good. I do some sketching, but I'm not up to his standard . . .'

'You know this man!'

'Oh no.'

‘Yes! He was in the village on Saturday.’

‘But this is absurd . . .’

‘You helped Middleton photograph him!’

‘I assure you, I’ve never seen that man in my life!’

And strangely, the assertion had a ring of confidence, as though here he felt himself on safe ground.

‘But you *do* know his name.’

‘Not even that. He’s a complete and utter stranger.’

They gazed at each other; his eyes were steady. Then steps approached along the passage.

‘Hello, Mums.’

The woman who appeared was slim and neat-figured, like Lionel Easton. She had also his narrow but handsome features, framed in exotically styled blonde hair. Perfume came with her.

‘I thought I heard voices . . . do introduce me, Lionel!’

‘These are police officers, Mums. I’m afraid we haven’t got round to names.’

‘Police officers. . .?’ Her eye fell on the picture. ‘Oh, now I understand! I’ve been to Laura’s. While I was there Police Constable Campsey called with that picture. But we didn’t know him. Do you, Lionel?’

‘Perfect stranger to me, Mums.’

Mrs Easton looked at Gently with avid curiosity. ‘What’s he supposed to have done?’

‘We wish to interview him.’

‘Oh – I see! You are not permitted to tell me that. But for heaven’s sake let’s get out of this smelly place. We can talk just as well in the lounge.’

Gently shrugged, and they followed her. The lounge was a high-ceilinged, over-furnished room. French windows gave a view of a terraced lawn with well-groomed flower beds, backed by trees.

‘Who is it I’m talking to?’

Gently told her.

‘My goodness – top brass. I’d better get you a drink. I would invite you to lunch, but it’s only a scratch meal today.’

She supplied them with generous Scotches from a cabinet that lit when she opened it. Her son smilingly poured himself a beer – the heat was off him now, and he knew it!

Mrs Easton sat and crossed her shapely legs.

‘Now, what can we tell you, Superintendent? I take it that you weren’t in the darkroom merely to ask Lionel about the picture.’

‘We are interested in a photograph of the man in question.’

‘But surely you don’t expect to find one here?’

‘The photograph was taken in Grimchurch. At a short distance from Miss Stoven’s cottage.’

Mrs Easton made a small mouth. ‘Well, that isn’t very far away! And of course, we’re great friends with Ka, though I still fail to see the connection. When was this photograph supposed to have been taken?’

‘We think it was taken on Saturday.’

‘On Saturday.’ She looked at the smiling Lionel. ‘You were in all day on

Saturday, weren't you?'

'That's what I've just been trying to tell them, Mums.'

'You didn't photograph that man?'

'Rather not. I was nowhere near the Dryad's place.'

Mrs Easton beamed at Gently. 'Then we don't seem able to help you, Superintendent. But I wish you would bend the rules for a moment and tell us what the man has done.'

Gently returned the smile and sipped his drink. 'Were you at home on Saturday, Mrs Easton?'

'Yes, in the morning. But Cosmo is a golfer. I always go visiting in the afternoon.'

'I understand that young Middleton was here.'

'Dick? I saw him around before lunch.'

'He came back after lunch, Mums,' Lionel Easton said. 'We were developing his avocet spool.'

Mrs Easton raised her eyes. 'Oh, this birdwatching! And I never could really see much in it. But Dick and Lionel are completely hooked. They'll crouch around freezing for hours on end.'

'Miss Stoven too, I'm told,' Gently smiled.

'Yes, Ka's as crazy as the rest. Lionel invited her here on Saturday, but she went off to see some bird instead.'

'On Saturday . . .?'

Lionel Easton gestured. 'It was just a passing thought,' he said. 'Dad brought home some literature she wanted to see, so I gave her a tinkle.'

'On Saturday.'

'Yes, actually.'

'And she didn't turn up?'

'Well, Phil Rushmere rang her about a stork that had dropped in, and apparently she went to see that instead.'

'Without saying a word,' Mrs Easton laughed. 'And I'm sure that the boys would have liked to have seen it. But that's Ka all over. You never know what she'll do next.'

'This was on Saturday afternoon?'

'I rang her in the morning,' Lionel Easton said shortly. 'But it was nothing. She could have dropped in at any time. I wasn't surprised when she didn't turn up.'

Yet there was a pause while he stared at his beer, and Mrs Easton smiled at nothing.

'Oh, but Ka!' she exclaimed at last. 'Ka really is an original. She dresses 'twentyish, with cropped hair – thinks she's Katherine Mansfield or someone.'

'We are hoping to talk to her,' Gently said.

'Well, you'll be lucky if she makes much sense.'

'We don't seem lucky in being able to find her.'

'Ka?' She sounded surprised. 'Have you seen her, Lionel?'

'Not lately, Mums,' Lionel Easton said. 'According to Dick she's gone away.'

'Gone away where?'

He shrugged smilingly. 'You know how she works as well as most people.'

Mrs Easton shook her head. 'That girl needs a father,' she said reprovingly. 'She comes of a broken home, you know. Her father died and her mother remarried. Rather sad. Now she's living up here and never sees her mother at all.'

‘So where would she have gone?’

‘Heaven only knows. But I doubt if she’s gone to Wimbledon.’

‘Isn’t that where her mother lives?’

Mrs Easton nodded. ‘She’s living with her second husband in Ka’s old home. Ka moved to a flat. She was working for a publisher. Then her father’s estate was settled. Ka got a lump sum and a bit of income, and that’s when she bought the cottage up here. So now she lives alone, writing her poetry. Perhaps it isn’t a father she needs, but a husband.’

‘Dick’s stuck on her, of course,’ Lionel Easton said, to his beer.

‘But she needs a *man,’* Mrs Easton asserted.

CHAPTER FIVE

ASPALL WAS SILENT as they drove back down the drive and paused at the impressive gates. Then, when they'd regained the road, he turned impetuously to Gently.

'By crikey, I'm getting choked with this caper, sir!'

Gently grunted. He could understand it!

'I mean you know, I know that kid is the joker, and he sits there playing the old soldier with us. And I've got men here – seven, with the sergeant – hunting for a body that doesn't exist! I'd like to take that mother's boy across my knee and spank the living daylights out of him.'

'He's carrying my money, I have to agree . . .'

'It's getting plainer all the time, sir. If young smiler rang the girl at all, it was just to make sure she wouldn't be at home. And no one's eye on them the whole afternoon! Nobody around to hear the shot. And what can we do about it? Perishing nothing – because if we lean on those kids there'll be hell to pay!'

'We still haven't got a line on the third one.'

Aspall snorted. 'You can leave him to me. He'll be one of their student pals from Eastwich. I'll soon get him sorted out.'

'Yet it's strange that he isn't known in the village.'

'They'd take care to pick one who wasn't, sir. He could've driven out here and been photographed and away before anyone spotted him.'

'If they could trust him they'd have to know him well . . . the odds are he'd have been here before.'

'You can trust our smart boy to have thought of that. He had all the other answers ready for us.'

They passed the lane end: Gently glanced towards the cottage. Just the minibus stood there, deserted. A bend hid the track through the wood from the road, from any eye . . . perhaps from any ear.

'Did it strike you that Easton seemed . . . less-informed, than Middleton?'

'Pardon, sir?' Aspall's face jerked towards him.

'As though to him it was indeed just a joke, whereas to Middleton . . .' He left it trailing.

Aspall digested the notion. 'They've different temperaments, sir. You could get Middleton to crack sooner.'

'But allowing for that . . . I was inclined to believe Easton when he denied having met or seen the man.'

Aspall was silent again. They drove into the yard of The Fisherman's Rest, to rendezvous with Campsey.

The Fisherman's Rest was a sober brick building that suggested a council office more than a pub. It stood at a corner, across from The Purlins, and half a dozen cars were already parked in the yard.

Campsey approached.

'I've ordered lunches, sir . . . they do you quite well here.'

'Have they a private room?'

'Yes sir. Would you like a pint to go on with?'

The room was bleak, but an electric fire was doing its best to provide cheer. Their drinks were fetched by a flamboyant lady of uncertain age but powerful presence.

'The beer's good, anyway . . .'

'Yes sir.' Campsey looked gratified. 'It's from one of the last of the independents, sir. They still deliver by dray, over at Wolmering.'

'What's your news, then?'

'I don't have any, sir. And I've covered most of the village now. I was across at The Purlins. They told me you'd been there, and I thought the lady looked a bit upset.'

'Did you see the lad?'

'No sir. And the lady got rid of me pretty damn quick.'

'Reckon she's on to him, sir,' Aspall said. 'It struck me she knew how to handle sonny. Perhaps we should call back.'

'Perhaps.' Gently sipped the excellent beer. 'Who's in the bar?'

'Just the regulars,' Campsey said. 'And a rep from London on his way to Lothing.'

'No luck there.'

'None sir. It looks like our man doesn't come from these parts.'

No luck – and luck was surely what they were needing most in this case! After the first flattering breakthrough they had run up against a number of closed doors. Because Aspall was right, of course: they had no grounds for leaning too hard on the kids. Nothing positive to go on . . . they weren't even certain that the photograph was of recent origin. Unless they turned up something soon the case was going to bog down.

'You'll know young Middleton and young Easton?'

'Yes sir. They're a decent pair of kids.'

'I'd like you to ask around. If anyone saw them near the scene on Saturday afternoon.'

'Yes sir.' Campsey looked perturbed. 'Do we think they're involved in this, sir?'

'We damn well know they're involved in it!' Aspall snapped. 'So don't go dragging your feet, Campsey.'

'No sir.' Campsey stayed blank faced. 'Just wanted to know where we stood, sir.'

Lunch arrived, and with it Sergeant Warren to add to the tale of non-progress.

'We've cleared the wood, sir, and the clifftop. I've knocked them off for a bite to eat.'

'What about the Priory?'

'I took a look round there, sir. I couldn't see that anything had been disturbed. It'd be a right old place to park a body, but if you dug a hole it would have to show up.'

'Nothing likely in the ruins?'

'Just a lot of old stones, sir, and bullocks' pancakes. Plenty of those.'

No body – and there wasn't going to be one! That was Sergeant Warren's

transparent conviction.

The lunch matched the beer in quality but it was eaten in steady silence. Cars came and went outside, the toothsome landlady collected the dishes. And everyone was thinking the same thing, sharing the same mood of gloom.

'Well, I'll be off, sir,' Campsey said, rising.

'Me too, sir,' Warren said.

They went hastily, as though glad to escape from the settled depression in the room. Aspall caught Gently's eye.

'So what now, sir?'

Gently shrugged over his coffee. 'Some routine,' he said. 'If we can't find the body, at least we'd better find Miss Stoven.'

Aspall's expression lacked enthusiasm. 'Do you really think she can tell us something, sir?'

'I think it's odd that she took off so suddenly. And odd that she cut her visit to the Eastons.'

'You've only young Easton's word for the invitation, sir.'

'On balance, I'm inclined to believe him.'

Aspall made an irritable plunge at the sugar. But clearly one didn't come between Gently and his hunches . . .!'

'What do you want done, sir?'

'I want you to get on to Wimbledon. It shouldn't be difficult to locate her mother. Either the girl is there or her mother can tell us where to look. Also I want to know about friends that she may have had in Wimbledon. Especially boyfriends. Draw Wimbledon's attention to the copy of the photograph being circulated.'

Aspall stared. 'You think he comes from there, sir?'

'One thing's certain – he doesn't come from here!'

'But, sir—'

'This is our only lead. So I want it followed up.'

Aspall tightened his lips. 'Where will you be, sir?'

'I'll be having a talk with that bird warden. Then I'll meet you again here. I shall need the car.'

Aspall winced. 'Yes, sir.'

But he didn't go straight to the bird warden's house, which was off Heath Lane, beyond Sandlings. First he turned down to Katherine Stoven's cottage and parked for some minutes behind the minibus.

Now the low sun was fronting the cottage, just as it must have done on Saturday. Ahead it laid bars of light across the track, including one where the body would have been lying . . . visible here, from the cottage gate, though perhaps not from the cottage, which was screened by a hedge.

Yet the crack of a pistol, that must have been heard – even the modest pop of a ·22! In such quietness as this, it would have brought her running to see who it was disturbing her solitude. And then what had she seen . . .? Who had seen her . . .? What had changed her mind about calling at Sandlings – the gates of which she would be passing in any case, on her way to the reserve?

He studied the cottage again, in its sunny innocence. Whatever she had seen, she had returned to it: had spent three more nights there, perhaps four, before vanishing without a word to her friends. Did it hide some secret . . .? It sat so still, its windows

shut, its chimney smokeless . . . yet it was long odds that its owner had merely flung off to Wimbledon, on a sudden impulse of reconciliation. It was that sort of case. You didn't know its weight, didn't dare grab the nettle too firmly . . .

Disgruntledly, he turned the car and sent it winging back to the road.

A turning to the right, some distance past Sandlings, led to the bird warden's abode. A No Vehicles Beyond This Point board was contradicted by tyre marks, and Gently took the liberty of driving on. The lane was a rough one. Brambles reached out to scrape the passing car. Ruts set it bobbing and lurching, and the wheels skittered on soft patches. Within half a mile however it ran out into open heath, and there, beside a gloomy thicket, stood a slightly unkempt dwelling.

A lonely place; for sheer isolation it surpassed even Miss Stoven's cottage. All that neighboured it was undulating heath, fringed in the distance by blue-green pines. Heather and gorse scrub darkened the heath, which was freaked with white sand and whiter pebbles. The thicket was of spiky hawthorn, old and tangled: a sort of witch wood.

What sort of a man would live here?

Gently got out and stared at the cottage. A little larger than Miss Stoven's, it was built in the same style of blank brick and pantile. Its bit of ground was fenced, but otherwise neglected. A garage and a shed stood at the rear. On each side of the porch were placed beehives, their occupants stirring in the pale sun. A telephone . . .? There didn't seem to be one. A Calor gas bottle stood by the garage.

The gate stood open: Gently went up and knocked, with an eye on the restless, zooming bees. No answer. A glance into the garage showed that, like Miss Stoven's, it was empty. But the bird warden was certainly in residence: windows of two of the rooms were steamy. Presumably he had had his lunch and returned to his business of wardening.

So now where did one seek him . . .?

Gently turned the car and bumbled back to Heath Lane. A little further along it he came to the public entrance to the reserve. Here there was a hut displaying publications and a box for money, but no attendant: just a tarmac track beckoning across the heath to an elevated knoll, where cars were parked. He drove on. To the left was the sea, dreamily visible over the cliff edge, to the right the rolling heath with its leprous burns of sand and stones. On the knoll a couple with slung binoculars were in the act of locking a 1300: Gently swung in beside them and hastily jumped out.

'Excuse me! I'm looking for the warden.'

'I'm afraid we haven't seen him.'

They were elderly people, dressed in smart tweeds and wearing formidable boots with chunky socks.

'Do you know where I'll find him?'

'You could try the hides. That's his car, so he'll be here somewhere.'

'The hides . . .?'

'Down there along the wall. Follow the path and you can't miss them.'

Nor could he. The scene below the knoll spread down the coast in a panorama – beach, low sandhills bushy with tamarisk, and behind a shallow bank, marsh and mere. Open water was visible among the reeds but to the right they swung inland in a strange, fawn sea, bounded by a clear stream and high bracken slopes, and beyond by

birches, copper in the sun. Far down the coast brooded the cube of a power station, and on the edge of the mere a distant black mill tower. Stooping fields, and a frieze of pines and hardwoods, formed the horizon to the west.

'You see? Down there . . .'

What looked like two cattle stalls were perched on the rim of the bank. One or two figures, seeming shadowless and without perspective, strolled on the pale sand below them.

'And if he isn't at the hides?'

The elderly man shrugged. 'Anyway, he'll be back here by dark. But you should find him.'

They went off cheerfully, with the binoculars bumping against their chests.

Gently remained staring while he lit his pipe. Down there . . . what a place to hide a body! It was almost search-proof, and you would probably need an Act of Parliament even to begin . . .

He spared a moment for the warden's car, a stocky little Daf 33; then pressed his match into the turf and set off down the track to the beach.

CHAPTER SIX

‘PHILIP RUSHMURE?’

And after all, he found his man at the first attempt: up steps made of sleepers sunk in the sand, and in a long, low, pent-roofed shed.

A draughty hole! A slit opened on the mere to admit a thin, persistent air, and a rough bench ran the length of the structure to enable watchers to squat with their glasses.

At the moment there were only two of them, one a masculine-faced lady swathed in woollens. The other was a tall, lean, heavy-boned man, who was gazing through the slit with his glasses lowered.

‘Quiet – just a moment!’

Up came the glasses. Both the watchers crouched eagerly. And the wind kept sidling through the slit . . . Gently’s eyes were watering already!

‘What can you see?’

‘Mmn . . .?’

‘Is it something special?’

‘Just a moment . . .!’

But all there seemed to be out there were a handful of waders and a couple of ducks.

Gently sighed and reached out his matches. No doubting the identity of this earnest voyeur – it was sewn on the shoulder of his safari jacket, in gold letters on a green flash. A man of about forty-five, with a smallish head on a stalk-like neck, and features not unlike a bird’s – and, if it came to that, a piping voice. Very properly a birdman! His rapt attention with the glasses was almost like a meditation.

‘. . . what is it, then?’

‘I’m a police officer.’

The eyes turned towards him were something of a shock. Pale blue, they seemed without focus, as though staring through him into space.

‘Oh?’

‘I’d like a word with you.’

The eyes remained far away. It was uncanny: you wondered whether he was seeing you at all.

‘Is it about avocets?’

‘It’s about Saturday. More especially the afternoon.’

‘Oh, I know nothing about Saturday. I was down here all day.’

‘That’s what I’m asking about. Who was with you?’

Rushmere gave a little snuffle. ‘It’s my busiest day – lots of people! I really wouldn’t know where to begin.’

‘Didn’t you ring someone to join you?’

The eyes were as vacant as the sea. ‘Did I do that?’

‘So I’ve been told.’

‘Then quite probably it’s true.’

‘But *did* you?’ Gently said, beginning to lose patience.

For answer Philip Rushmere snatched up his glasses: a hoarse quacking had come from the mere. He crouched alertly, elbows braced.

‘Yes, I did – Ka Stoven. Something I knew she’d want to see.’

‘What was that?’

He ignored the question. ‘She was with me until dark.’

‘From when?’

‘Oh . . . after lunch. About 2 p.m., I would say.’

‘You rang her at lunchtime?’

‘Mm . . . mmn.’

‘May I ask from where you rang?’

His finger stroked the focus-wheel of the glasses. ‘Quiet, please – just for a moment!’

And the trouble was that you couldn’t decide if his evasions were deliberate or not. The mind behind a pair of eyes like that might well be as darting as a sparrow’s. The head, the curious face . . . you seemed to be dealing with a different breed, with a man dropped in from Mars. If you pricked him, he might not bleed.

‘Where did you ring from?’

‘I didn’t ring.’

‘But you just said you did!’

‘No, you said that. It doesn’t really matter, but I called on Ka after lunch.’

Gently stared frostily. ‘And that’s the definitive version?’

‘It’s exactly what happened. If you put leading questions, you must expect impertinent answers.’

A rap on the knuckles, even! And now the glasses swept the scene randomly, pausing insolently, with the expert finger crisply adjusting focus. A part of the man . . . a talisman, between his eyes and the world . . .

‘Lend me your glasses, will you?’

‘Eh?’

But Gently had his hands on them. Firmly he took them, and Rushmere was compelled reluctantly to slide the lanyard over his head.

‘Now . . . I expect you’re making your rounds. I may as well come along with you.’

‘But, really!’

‘We can talk as we go.’

And he ducked through the door and slithered down the sleepers.

‘These are good glasses.’

‘If you don’t mind—!’

Clearly Gently didn’t mean to part with them. He had stuffed his head through the lanyard and now was studying the misty power station.

‘They’ve got the penetration of the devil. Who was the lady who was listening so hard?’

‘Mrs Holton, but if you’ve quite finished—’

‘We may as well keep our business private.’

It was good: the glasses stayed ruthlessly clamped in Gently's hands. He was searching around for fresh objects and quite ignoring the agitated birdman. They were tramping along a sandy trough between the wall of the mere and the marram banks, out of sight of both sea and fresh water – really, nothing to see at all!

'What were those that just went over?'

'Common sandpipers. Now, I insist—!'

'They tell me you had a stork around here on Saturday.'

'Look, I simply don't have the time!'

But Gently did. He tramped on cheerfully, whipping up the glasses now and then. He was enjoying himself, his expression said – there were birds about! This was fun!

'If you've something to ask me, for heaven's sake ask it!'

'Eh? Isn't Miss Stoven crazy about birds?'

'Why do you keep on about Ka Stoven?'

'Look, I know that fellow. It's a heron!'

And so it went on for a teasing half-mile, until Rushmere was reduced to a sulky silence. Then the way ahead was interrupted by the sluice that drained the marshes. It was an untidy yet picturesque feature, with comfortable iron rails to lean on. From them, below, a drain popular with waterfowl stretched across the marsh towards the old pump-mill.

Gently leant on the rails. 'But why Miss Stoven?'

Rushmere's odd, small-chinned face was bitter. 'Why . . .?'

'With the whole of the village to pick from, why did the choice fall on the Dryad?'

His mouth quivered. 'That isn't her name, and she doesn't much like being called by it!'

'It's familiar usage with some of her friends.'

'That's no reason for you to adopt it.'

Gently hunched. 'But still . . . why?'

'I can't see what that has to do with you.'

'Perhaps we both know.'

Rushmere stared at the waterfowl: up the drain were a timid pair of grebes.

'So where is she now?'

'Don't you know?' The piping voice had gone high.

'Do you?'

'No – I don't!' But the voice was still shrill.

'I think she'd have told someone where she was going.'

'But why pick on me?'

'Perhaps because you picked on her on Saturday.'

'Look – those ducks that just settled. They're widgeon!'

He snatched for the glasses, but Gently's hands grasped them remorselessly. The curious eyes flickered angrily and almost, for the moment, found a focus.

'Let's get on to what you do know. What time did you call at hers on Saturday?'

Rushmere snatched his eyes away. 'After lunch. I've already told you.'

'Couldn't you put a time to it?'

'I don't know! I called on my way back. Half-past one to two. Why should you want to know that?'

'Was she alone?'

'Give me my glasses!'

'Just answer the question, Mr Rushmere.'

‘I don’t have to answer anything, but you *do* have to give me my glasses.’

‘Just a moment.’

Calmly deliberate, Gently focused on the widgeon. Half a dozen of them, all males, the buff on the chestnut heads showing plainly. ‘Who was with her . . .?’

‘Nobody!’

‘Lionel Easton had been in touch with her.’

‘That was on the phone!’

‘She told you, did she?’

‘Just give those glasses back here!’

Gently lowered the glasses, but didn’t give them back. ‘I’m asking you to think very carefully, Mr Rushmere. This could be a matter of some importance . . . look there! That was a kingfisher.’

‘I tell you, she was *alone!’*

‘Did you go in?’

‘No – yes! But only for a moment.’

‘She was acting naturally, without constraint?’

‘Yes, naturally – there was no one there!’

‘No car out front?’

‘Nothing. Give me back my glasses!’

Gently didn’t.

‘Let’s take a stroll along the beach.’

Rushmere’s fingers were itching for the glasses. He was like a drug addict deprived of his syringe: for the moment nothing else seemed to matter. His very manhood might have been bound up in them! Perhaps it was his eyes where the virtue of him lay.

‘This is no better than persecution. I *don’t* have to go where you tell me!’

‘Yes . . . come on! We have to ask questions, and it’ll be pleasant along the foreshore.’

‘First, I want to know what it’s about.’

‘I’ll tell you that as we go. Do you ever get tides over these sand dunes?’

Like it or not, Rushmere had to follow him.

And it was pleasant along the foreshore, on the hard sand below the shingle. The low sun was yellowing the breakers and giving a warm glow to the misted distance. Grotesque driftwood, bladder-wrack and scraps of crumpled plastic strewed the tideline, and gulls yelped and wheeled. Over the dunes it was another world.

‘You see a lot of Miss Stoven, do you . . .?’

Rushmere’s eyes were so distant because the pupils were small. As though he really were drugged – but that was scarcely in question: his aspect was one of vigorous good health. He had a fresh, outdoor complexion, yet that seemed somehow superimposed, as though he once might have worked in an office . . . what would he have been? A solicitor’s clerk?

‘I see a lot of people. That’s my job.’

‘But her you know on a social footing.’

‘What if I do?’

‘You visit her cottage. When something special turns up, you want to share it with her. What was it, after all?’

‘It was a stork, but—’

‘Is that such a rarity?’

‘Of course it’s a rarity! They’re scarce visitors. Just occasionally we get one blown across from Holland.’

‘So you thought at once, Ka Stoven should see it.’

‘I knew she’d be interested – yes!’

‘But you didn’t think, say, Lionel Easton might be interested – though Sandlings is closer to your place than her cottage?’

‘No. Why should I?’

‘Is Miss Stoven a photographer?’

‘No. You obviously know nothing about her! And I simply won’t answer any more questions until you tell me what it’s about.’

His small mouth set stubbornly. And he still wanted the glasses so badly! Walking between Gently and the sea, he kept shooting little glances, checking if Gently’s hands were still on them. And if it came to a struggle he might prove a handful . . . plenty of power in that heavy-boned frame.

‘It’s about the man who died here on Saturday . . . those are some of the more common sandpipers, aren’t they?’

From the corner of his eye he was watching Rushmere: the birdman’s mouth gaped. But he said nothing.

‘Well?’

‘Of course they’re . . . sandpipers!’

‘Weren’t you going to say something else?’

‘No, I wasn’t!’

‘About the man who died?’

‘Don’t be stupid! Who was he?’

‘Take a look.’

Gently pulled out the impression and shoved it under Rushmere’s nose. The birdman’s vacant eyes stared at it and his mouth was very small.

‘Who – who is he?’

‘The man who died.’

‘But what’s his name?’

‘Do I have to tell you?’

Rushmere’s eyes flickered to his, and then away. *‘I* don’t know him!’

‘But you’ve seen him before.’

‘I say I haven’t.’

‘He was near Miss Stoven’s cottage on Saturday.’

‘Does she say that?’

‘Didn’t you see him?’

‘No – and you’re just trying it on!’

It was provoking. As near as damn it, Gently felt he had his hands on something. But his only card was bluff, and clearly it wasn’t going to take the trick.

‘Tell me . . . when did *you* last see Miss Stoven?’

‘Never mind when I last saw her!’

‘Please answer the question, Mr Rushmere.’

‘It may have been Monday, may have been Tuesday.’

‘When did she leave?’

‘Has she left?’

Gently felt like punching his head.

‘Where is she?’

‘If the police don’t know, I certainly can’t tell them.’

But he was lying, Gently was sure of it. Just for a moment Rushmere had been rocking. He’d believed that Gently knew more than he did, and it had worried him: just for a moment! Perhaps a name dropped . . .

‘We’ve been talking to young Middleton.’

‘Dick . . .?’ Was there a quaver of anxiety?

‘He was about there with his camera on Saturday.’

Rushmere hesitated, staring at the shingle. ‘I think you’re just trying to be clever,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you know what you’re doing at all. I suspect that someone is pulling your leg. And now – for the last time! – give me my glasses.’

Gently gave them to him. They were genuine Zeiss glasses, light and brilliant: the very thing.

Up at the car park again he paused, taking in once more that remarkable scene – the glowing sea, beach, dunes, mere, reed jungle and brackeny hills. Rushmere’s kingdom . . . and anything to lose might be lost there till the day of doom. If you knew it existed, and knew it was there, still . . . where would you begin?

‘Officer . . .?’

It was the well-wrapped lady who had been sharing the hide with Rushmere. She was sitting in a Toledo, and doubtless had been waiting for him. He approached her car.

‘Officer, I couldn’t help overhearing what you said to Mr Rushmere. But he was mistaken about one thing. It was later when he got to the hide with Miss Stoven.’

It was, was it? Gently smiled at her; she had bristles on her squarish chin. Wearing a shawl over a coat and many sweaters, she overflowed the Toledo’s seat.

‘What time would you say it was, ma’am?’

‘Oh, I’d say it was after three. But that was when they came to the hide, you know, and they could have been somewhere else first. I just thought I’d tell you.’ She started her engine.

‘Do you come here regularly, ma’am?’ Gently asked.

‘Oh yes,’ she smiled. ‘This is my life. I’d love to have Mr Rushmere’s job.’

‘Did you see the stork last week?’

‘Stork?’

‘I understand that one dropped in.’

She shook her head. ‘You’ve been misinformed. The last stork we had here was in the spring.’

‘You’re sure of that?’

‘Dear man, yes! It couldn’t have dropped in without my knowing. I’m here every day.’

And, beamingly, she backed the Toledo and drove away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SUN WAS lapsing in a brassy mist when Gently reparked at The Fisherman's Rest. He found Aspall basking by a newly lit fire in a private room that now was becoming cosy.

'Any news . . .?'

'Not yet sir, but they told me to expect a tinkle. Anything new with you, sir?'

Gently grunted. With this case you could never be certain!

He sat down on a chair across from Aspall and stuffed his pipe before giving the details. The fire was a coal fire in an old-fashioned grate and lit the dull room with cheerful flickerings. Outside, as soon as the sun dipped, it would start to freeze like the moon's backside. Aspall, cued by his senior, lit a fag and breathed smoke towards the flames.

'Has Warren reported?'

'Yes sir. I believe they're all pretty fed up.'

Who wouldn't be?

'Where have they got to?'

'Still on the cliffs, sir, among the heather.'

Gently puffed and told his news, which sounded thin enough when recounted. But Aspall listened interestedly, his large face ruddy in the firelight.

'You reckon Rushmere's tied up with it, sir?'

'I reckon he saw what he isn't telling us.'

'Him and the girl both, sir. They were both of them trying to rig up an alibi.'

'It could be something simpler.'

'Rushmere's divorced, sir. They wouldn't need an alibi for that.'

'But he's not the type . . .'

'If he's keen on the girl, sir, and she's pally with the kids, she could have dragged him into it.'

Gently blew smoke-rings, unconvinced. Somehow, it didn't seem to add together. Rushmere *wasn't* the type: if he'd known about a hoax, he would surely have dropped a hint. Easton and Middleton would have been the instigators, and they'd have got off with a wigging and a fine – probably deserved, Rushmere would have thought – and the girl need never have been brought into it. No . . . he wasn't the type! And where was the girl? What reason did she have to vanish? What made her more vulnerable than the kids, so that she couldn't stop to face a policeman . . .?

But, on the other hand, if it wasn't a hoax, what credible explanation could there be for the facts? Blackmail? That was a laugh! Who was there, here, to be blackmailing whom?

'We need something solid. A lever . . .'

Aspall nodded. 'The body would have done, sir.'

Gently pulled a face. ‘You think it’s time we called them off?’

‘It’s up to you, sir. We’ll keep searching.’

But clearly Aspall had lost faith in that body and probably in any useful outcome. Sitting there alone, toasting his toes, he’d doubtless been seeking a face-saving formula. His anger had evaporated. They’d done their best, now for Christ’s sake . . . get back to the villains! And by the fire, in the flame-lit room, didn’t that sound the only reasonable viewpoint?

The phone rang. Aspall stirred himself reluctantly to take it. He listened a while, his eyes rounding, then he held out the receiver to Gently.

‘The Yard, sir – I thought it best to go through them. Wimbledon have got a name for us.’

‘Hello, sir – how are the swedes?’ It was Dutt’s perky voice at the other end.

‘Never mind the swedes! What have you got?’

‘I’m not quite sure, sir. But it sounds comic.’

‘So make me laugh.’

Behind Dutt’s voice one could hear the sounds of the outer office – a typewriter tacking, door slamming, someone beefing about a file. A long way from The Fisherman’s Rest! Even the smell seemed in his nostrils . . .

‘Some geezer did a bank at Wimbledon last week, sir.’

‘A bank?’

‘Yes sir. The National Provincial.’

‘What’s that to us?’

‘I’m coming to it, sir. The bank was bust on Thursday morning. They’d just taken a delivery for a wages payout, hadn’t even had time to lock the vault. The Securicor van drove away from the front and chummie came swanning in at the back. He was masked and had a gun. He got away with thirty thousand nicker.’

‘So?’

‘An alarm was rung, sir, and the lads were round there real sharp, and what with one thing and another they reckoned they were dealing with an inside job. Was there anyone off sick? Yes, there was, sir – a young counter clerk called Sternfield. So they shot off round to his flat, and that’s where they seemed to have dropped a clanger.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘They was there too quick, sir. Seems like Sternfield had cached the loot on the Common. The dogs sniffed out a hole there, but no loot and no Sternfield. They reckon he must have come back from stashing the loot to see the cars outside his flat, so then he doubled back, collected the dough, and lit out for foreign parts.’

‘And he’s the one on the photograph?’

‘Yes sir. Positive identification from the bank. Wimbledon would have identified him sooner, only they didn’t have a picture of Sternfield. They couldn’t find one at his flat and he doesn’t have any relatives – he’s an ex-Barnardo Boy. Then you came along asking about the girl.’

‘How did that help?’

‘You asking about her friends, sir. Her mother straightaway mentioned this Sternfield. So then the penny dropped and they showed the photograph to the bank.’

‘And the girl? Is she there?’

‘I’m afraid not, sir. Her mother hasn’t heard from her for a year.’

Gently shifted his grip on the phone and leaned his bulk against the wall. From

having nothing he seemed suddenly to have everything, all done up in a neat parcel! A fleeing bank robber, a gun, a motive for murder as big as a house – you really couldn't ask for more. And yet . . . as always . . .

'How much do we know about Sternfield?'

'Aged twenty-four, sir, and quite bright. Has a flat up the Hill. Worked at the bank since he left school.'

'What about associates?'

'None known. He didn't make many friends at the bank. A lot of books and stuff at the flat – seems he was a bit of a birdwatcher.'

That figured!

'Was he keen on Miss Stoven?'

'They seem to have been thick at one time, sir. Then she got some dough when her father died and went off to live in the sticks.'

'Were any of her letters found in the flat?'

'Didn't hear any mention of them, sir.'

'What make of gun?'

'A pistol. Nobody could give a precise description.'

'And the money?'

'A lot of used notes, sir. Chummie packed them in a paper carrier. But he must have had something else handy, because they found the carrier at the hole.'

'He was on foot?'

'Oh yes, sir. They reckoned he caught a bus into town.'

And from there it was easy for the enterprising bank clerk in his C & A jacket and country shoes – though doubtless, for the raid, he had worn some over-garment to prevent recognition by his colleagues. He had merged into the crowds at Liverpool Street and caught the next train to Eastwich . . . was there a bus service to Grimchurch? . . . by the afternoon, he'd have been at the cottage. On Thursday . . . leaving ample time to arrange any plans for the weekend . . .

'Sir?' At Dutt's end the typewriter was still clacking, in nervous bursts.

'I want a pick-up out on Miss Stoven.'

'There's one out already, sir.'

'And just in case . . . tell them not to jump to any conclusions about Sternfield. Not to cancel his pick-up.'

He put down the phone: and London died.

They sat in silence on each side of the fire, each staring at the glowing coals. Though it wasn't four yet it was almost dusk; there were lights across the road, at The Purlins.

At last Aspall looked across: 'Sir, now we *know* the shooting was faked!'

Gently chewed on his cold pipe. That really was the only feasible line . . .!

'But they'd all have to be in on it.'

Aspall nodded eagerly. 'That's how I see it, sir. And it fits. They're the right little lot to try to pull a stunt like this.'

'The two youngsters, perhaps.'

'Rushmere too, sir. He'd play along. If you're right about him being sweet on the girl, you can bet he'd keep his trap shut.'

'Even though Miss Stoven was clearing out with a lover?'

'He wouldn't like it, sir, but he wouldn't shop her.'

'Don't forget young Middleton fancies her, too.'

‘But he knows there’s no chance, sir. It wouldn’t stop him from helping her.’

Gently tapped out his pipe: still the picture wasn’t focusing! Uneasily in his mind was the picture of Ka Stoven’s cottage. So neat, so personal . . . would she have left it at a moment’s notice, perhaps never to return? Irritably, he filled his pipe again.

‘Let’s hear how you’re putting it together.’

‘Yes sir.’ Aspall hitched his chair closer. ‘I reckon this Sternfield was so stuck on the girl that he was ready to do something desperate. That’s what it’s about. He couldn’t offer her enough, not after she’d got the money from her father. As I read it she gave him the push when she came to live up here.’

Gently thumbed his pipe: this was ingenious!

‘You don’t think they set it up together?’

Aspall hesitated. ‘No sir. It sounds like she’d given him the shove. No one has ever seen him up this way, and we don’t hear of her making trips to town.’

Gently nodded. ‘Keep shooting.’

‘Well sir, he arrives with his thirty thousand quid. The trouble is he hasn’t been quite fly enough and we’ve got a sticking-plaster on him. So what’s he to do? He can’t stay with the girl, because sooner or later we’d snout her out. And he can’t stay in circulation, because then we’d have him even sooner. There’s only one way to get the heat off him, and that’s to kid us that he’s dead.’

Gently blew smoke in a long stream. ‘But could they really have been so stupid?’

‘Sir?’

‘Even a bunch of amateurs must have realized that faking a death would only double our interest.’

Aspall looked blank. ‘I don’t think so, sir. More likely they’d treat it all as a lark. And sir, they must have felt pretty confident that we could never identify the scene.’

‘But the heat would get hotter!’

‘All the same, sir, I doubt if they’d really give it much thought. Not at the time. They’d be too busy faking up their comic snapshot.’

Gently grunted over his pipe. Perhaps in this case anything was credible! But then there was Rushmere, far from being stupid . . . or didn’t he come into it till later?

‘Now tell me why the girl would go off with Sternfield – bearing in mind that she owns the cottage?’

Aspall was beginning to get warm: he was gripping the arms of the chair.

‘She could still fancy him, sir.’

‘Rubbish. She hadn’t bothered about him for months.’

‘Well, he did have a bagful of money . . .’

‘Hot money. And she’s got enough of her own.’

‘Look sir, if she went along with faking the photograph she might have gone along a bit further. Like helping him to get fixed up somewhere, get started with a new identity.’

‘How would her going off with him help that?’

‘His description would still be fresh in people’s minds, sir. A couple would attract less attention than a stranger on his own.’

Gently shook his head. How could you credit it – even if the principals were cock-eyed as coots? A body, and thirty thousand nicker going spare! Not even an idiot could expect to get away with it . . .

‘And where does the alibi bit fit in?’

‘The alibi, sir . . .?’

‘Rushmere and the girl’s! Look, it works like this: she arranged an alibi with Easton, but that was bust when his parents went out. So then it was changed to her appearing at the reserve, where the time can’t be checked, and they thought up the idea of the stork to give her an excuse for the change of plan.’

‘That’ll be what happened, sir.’

‘But what’s it about? What was the alibi supposed to cover? And if Rushmere and the girl needed one, why not the other two – why didn’t they all show up together?’

Aspall stared. ‘They’d think the girl was most vulnerable.’

‘But in connection with *what?’* Gently puffed meanly. ‘Nobody can swear when that photograph was taken. Nobody can swear who exactly was involved. They’d no reason to think any of them needed an alibi – if all they were doing was faking a photograph.’

Aspall’s mouth opened. ‘You don’t think it *was* faked . . .?’

Gently let go another caustic puff. ‘What I’m stressing is the thirty thousand pounds. Killing has been done for less before now.’

‘But . . . sir!’

Aspall gazed at the fire, eyes part indignant and part dismayed. Plainly he’d been willing that photograph to be a fake, had anticipated that Gently would go along with him.

‘But . . . if it isn’t a fake . . . who did it?’

‘It was Rushmere and the girl who went for an alibi.’

‘But they were *all* in it!’

‘That’s how we’ve been seeing it. Which doesn’t mean to say that’s how it was.’

‘Then how . . .?’

Gently shrugged. In fact, they were back again where they’d started. If the corpse was real, explain the photograph. If the corpse was faked, explain the facts. Whichever way you swung the pendulum, it came to rest between the two.

‘We shall need a couple of warrants. One for the girl’s place, one for Rushmere’s.’

‘Yes sir. I’ll get them sent out from Wolmering.’ Aspall rose as though glad to break up the conference.

Gently rose too, and switched on the light. Well . . . he could forget his train back to town! Insensibly, that private room in The Fisherman’s Rest had drifted into the status of an HQ. A murder HQ . . .? If he could only be certain! But his instinct refused to commit itself. There was something odd here, perhaps something sinister, but its nature continued obscure. So they’d plod on, following the routine, trying to get a finger in the pie, keeping their theories in the background, and hoping for the break to come . . . At least, now, the case had respectability – a wanted man and thirty thousand pounds! Though in such an orphan of a case as this, might not even the bank bust be a red herring?

‘Excuse me, sir.’

The handsome landlady had stuck her close-tonsured head round the door.

‘Mr Middleton, from The Purlins, has sent to ask if you can see him.’

‘Did he say what he wanted?’

‘He said his son Dick wanted to talk to you.’

‘Did he now!’ Gently mused. ‘Then you’d better ask him to step round.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

HE WATCHED THEM from the window: the father, Claude Middleton, a lean, spare-featured, spectacled man; the son a sturdier, clumsier figure, dressed now in a tweed jacket.

They walked briskly, head down, father a few steps ahead of son: not exactly like the guilty coming to confession, more like a deputation bearing terms. Nice people . . .! You were meeting Grimchurch when you met Claude Middleton and his son.

'This way, sir . . .'

You could tell the landlady's opinion from her tone of voice. Smiling obsequiously, she held the door while the pair of them trooped in.

The father advanced confidently. He looked older when seen under the lights, his hair thin and parted in the middle, his mouth hemmed with heavy lines.

He nodded to Aspall: 'Good evening, Inspector!'

Aspall responded a little awkwardly.

'Superintendent Gently . . .'

He made it an affirmation rather than a question.

And Dick Middleton, meanwhile, was doing his best to look at ease. His eyes were faintly scowling, but his chin was firmly held.

'First, I think we owe you an apology.' Middleton senior's eyes were conciliatory. 'You were questioning my son earlier, Super, and you rather caught him on the hop.' He laughed shortly. 'When you're eighteen, the world can be a baffling place. You sometimes wonder where your loyalties lie – you need time to think it out.'

Gently's stare was flat. 'And has your son thought it out?'

'I can understand your feelings, Super! You asked Dick specific questions, and he panicked and dug his toes in.'

'You mean he lied to me.'

'Oh . . . come, now!'

'Have you a more flattering term for it?'

'I think perhaps it amounted to No Comment, but Dick wouldn't be familiar with that useful expression. He didn't want to tell lies.'

'Are you suggesting we forced him into it?'

'Of course not! But I'm sure you appreciate the dilemma he was in.'

The flush on Dick Middleton's face didn't suggest an equal optimism; but his chin remained high and he stared unwinkingly at Gently's chest.

'Anyway, now he's come to put matters right. He's talked it over with his mother and me, and for what it's worth, in my opinion someone's been having a joke with the boy. But Dick's very certain about what he saw, so there was no question that you had to be told. It was his own decision, I may say, and I think you should give him credit for that.'

Gently grunted. ‘So what *did* he see?’

Dick Middleton’s chin rose yet higher. ‘I saw the man . . . the one in the picture. I was there when he was shot.’

Silence for a moment! It hung electrically in that sad, bleak room, with its pub tables and chairs, disreputable piano, and the brewer’s mirror mounted over the hearth. Even the fire burned dully silent: the room was holding its breath . . .

‘You’d better sit down.’

Imperturbably, Middleton senior took a chair by the fire. His son sat more abruptly, yet with an air of brash determination. Gently sat facing them. Aspall, after drawing the curtains, sought a chair by the piano and took out his notebook.

‘Now . . . let’s have the facts.’

Dick Middleton tilted his chin. ‘I was there when they shot him.’

‘They?’

‘There was another man anyway . . . there could have been more.’

‘Where were you, then?’

‘I was in the wood, and I heard their voices . . .’

‘You didn’t see them?’

‘No, I’m telling you! But I heard them running, at least two.’

‘Two men.’

‘Yes, two men! I heard first one shout, then the other.’

‘But you didn’t see them.’

‘No. When I got there, there was just him . . .’

Gently gazed at the younger Middleton. He’d heard this sort of thing before! The stock characters in fake confessions were just such faceless, nameless shadows. And when they had vanished into the mist, still you were left not an inch further forward . . .

‘I want names.’

‘But I didn’t *see* them!’

‘If I’m going to believe you, you’ll have to tell.’

‘But I can’t – because I didn’t! I know it sounds like I’m making it up, but it’s true – I heard their voices, and that’s all. They must have cleared off.’

‘Just their voices you heard.’

‘Yes – shouting!’

‘And of course, you didn’t hear what?’

‘Oh, my God!’ the young man burst out. ‘I knew – I just knew that no one would believe me!’

The elder Middleton cleared his throat. ‘Better take it from the beginning, Dick,’ he said. ‘I know you’re convinced it’s gospel, old fellow, but it does sound a bit thin to some of us.’

‘So what’s the use, then?’

‘You must tell what you know. It’s up to the Super what he makes of it.’

Dick Middleton scowled at the floor for some moments, his fresh young mouth stubborn and tight. Then he heaved his shoulders in an exaggerated shrug.

‘All right then! It’s to do with Ka.’

‘With Miss Stoven?’

‘Yes – Ka. I got worked up when I saw that fellow there. Not that it was really any business of mine, but – well’ – he blushed – ‘I *did* get worked up!’

Gently nodded. ‘We’re talking about Sternfield?’

‘The fellow who was shot. I don’t know his name. But I saw him at the cottage on Friday – and quite obviously, Ka didn’t want me to see him.’

‘You saw him in her cottage?’

‘Yes, at the window. I called there at Friday teatime. Just to say hello to Ka – I hadn’t seen her since bonfire night. Well, she usually asks me in for a chat – a cup of tea, that sort of thing – but on Friday she kept me at the door, seemed to want to get rid of me. And then I saw this fellow peering round a curtain, though he whisked the curtain across directly. Ka must have known, because I acted so stupidly. I yammered and didn’t know what to say.’

‘Did she explain his presence to you?’

‘No! And I sheered off straight away. But I was boiling. I couldn’t help it – it was so damned furtive, so . . . I don’t know! You see, I’ve always looked on Ka as rather special, a special person . . . she should have been above it.’

Dick Middleton stared, frowningly indignant, the beginning of a tremor in his lower lip.

‘Who did you tell about seeing this man?’

‘I told Lionel, that’s all. I felt so sick about it, and I knew that Lionel wouldn’t talk. But I couldn’t just leave it at that, either. There was something so *wrong* about that fellow! I wanted to get another look at him, to find out what he was doing there.’

‘And did you?’

‘I . . . well.’ Dick Middleton stared at the fire uncertainly. ‘I suppose I may as well tell you, because you’ll be on to Lionel anyway.’ He chewed on his lip. ‘We thought of a way to get Ka out of the cottage. Then I was going to prowl round and spy, and perhaps get a photograph of the fellow.’

‘When was this going to be?’

‘The next day, of course. Lionel’s father is a noise in the RSPB. Lionel offered to show Ka a Society report, which he pretended was only borrowed for the weekend. Ka didn’t sound too enthusiastic, but she agreed to call round after lunch.’

‘This was a phoned invitation.’

‘Yes. Lionel tilted the phone and I heard what she said.’

‘Did it sound as though she meant to keep the engagement?’

Dick Middleton hesitated. ‘Well . . . I suppose so.’

‘But she was reluctant.’

‘Yes. What she said was something like: I suppose I’d better come, as though it were a bore. But she could just as well have declined. Ka doesn’t usually do things if she doesn’t want to.’

‘And that I can vouch for,’ Middleton senior interjected, his glasses glinting at Gently. ‘The Dryad is an independent young lady. She wouldn’t say yes out of mere politeness.’

‘Anyway, we thought she’d come,’ Dick Middleton said. ‘We reckoned she’d arrive at about half-past two. So I had my lunch early and went round to Lionel’s, then at two I set off for the cottage.’

‘But presumably not by the road.’

He shook his head. ‘I wanted to approach the cottage from the wood. Then I could come in under cover and watch everything without being seen.’ He coloured suddenly. ‘I’m not proud of all this – but I was absolutely certain that the fellow was no good!’

'Go on.'

Dick Middleton swallowed. 'The grounds at Sandlings go down to the cliffs. There's a path running along the cliff edge, a bit dodgy because of falls. I worked my way along there until I was level with the wood.'

'Did you meet anyone?'

'No. There's never anyone up there.'

'On the beach perhaps?'

'There were one or two beach anglers, but they were further up, nearer the boats.'

'So no one saw you or recognized you.'

'All the same, I was there!' His cheeks were scarlet again. 'Why wouldn't I be telling you the truth?'

'Go on.'

His hands clenched and unclenched. 'I went down the side of the wood. There are paths in it – you have to stick to them if you don't want to make a noise. I came to the cross path – I can show you where – and I was a few yards down it. Then I heard the running and the shouting. So I froze there, listening.'

'How far were you from the track?'

'I don't know . . . perhaps a hundred yards.'

'Then you could see it.'

'No. The wood is overgrown with hazels and elders.'

'Tell me exactly what you heard.'

Dick Middleton groaned. 'It was so confused. There were running steps – two people at least – and one of them calling after the other. He sounded angry – perhaps shouting to him to stop, but I didn't catch the words – then the other shouted something, sort of desperate, threatening – then there was the shot and . . . silence.'

'Just . . . silence?'

'No – wait!' Dick Middleton's eyes jumped large. 'There was something else I could hear – but I'd forgotten it till now!' He stared apprehensively at Gently. 'I could hear a police siren.'

'A police siren . . .!'

Dick Middleton blushed from his hair to his hands. 'Of course, I know it couldn't have anything to do with it. But you did ask me exactly what I'd heard.'

Gently shook his head. 'A police siren in the wood?'

'No, I didn't say that! It was on the main road, a long way off, but it *was* sounding at just that time.'

'You didn't mention it to us, old chap,' his father murmured.

'But Dad, that's because I've only just remembered it! It was simply there, in the background. I'd forgotten about it till now.'

Gently sighed. 'Well . . . at least it's checkable! What would be your estimate of the time?'

'About two-fifteen. And please do check it – then at least you'll know I'm not lying about that!'

Gently nodded to Aspall, who rose and went to colloquize with the phone. They sat silently awaiting the fiat, Middleton *père* jiggling his glasses. Aspall hung up.

'It's right, sir,' he said. 'There was a pile-up at Yaxley Green. A squad car was alerted at Blyburgh crossroads, and it used its siren for over a mile.'

'Time?'

‘Between two-seventeen and two-nineteen.’

‘So now you *know!’* Dick Middleton exclaimed. ‘Perhaps now you’ll start believing me about the other things – I didn’t really come here to tell lies.’

Gently regarded him without expression. ‘The shot was fired while the siren was still sounding?’

‘Yes it was. I could hear the siren all the time this was going on.’

‘Before and after.’

‘Yes – which gives you the exact time, doesn’t it?’

‘According to you.’

‘Oh dear, oh dear!’ He pummelled his thigh with exasperation.

‘Go on,’ Gently said.

‘But what’s the use, when you’re utterly determined not to believe me?’

‘I’d like to hear what you saw at the track.’

Dick Middleton gazed with bitter eyes. ‘I thought it was simply a matter of telling the truth – of owning up, helping you. I didn’t realize you’d treat me like a liar unless I could prove everything I said.’

‘Still . . . let’s hear it.’

Dick Middleton bored at his thighs with pink fists.

‘I heard the shot, then. It wasn’t loud. It sounded like a banger that’d only half gone off. It didn’t really strike me as being a shot . . . for a moment I wasn’t sure what it was. Then I thought it might be a gun, someone popping off at the pigeons. Well, I wasn’t going to have that, so I started running towards the spot.’

‘How long from the shot till you started running?’

‘I don’t know. A second or two.’

‘Did you try to approach quietly?’

‘No. They had a gun, and I wanted them to hear me.’ His eyes sparkled. ‘This area is protected. No one has a right to shoot around here. Even the farmers play the game – you can’t allow guns near a reserve.’

‘You reckoned you were about a hundred yards from the track.’

‘Yes, it would be about that.’

‘It would take you, say, fifteen seconds to reach it, and you paused before beginning to run.’

Dick Middleton nodded.

‘So it may have been half a minute from the time of the shot till you reached the track.’

‘It could have been as long as that. I would put it at a bit less.’

‘Tell me what you saw.’

Dick Middleton scrubbed with his fists. ‘Well, I saw *him* . . . that’s all. Whoever shot him had cleared out.’

‘Did you look around for them?’

‘Of course I did. I knew they couldn’t be far away. But by then I wasn’t too inclined to go looking for them – they’d just shot a man, and they might have shot me.’

‘From that spot you can see the gate of the cottage. Did you notice if it was shut or open?’

‘No I didn’t.’

‘If a car was parked there?’

‘There wasn’t a car or anything else.’

‘You heard no sound of movement?’

‘Nothing. Just the siren tailing away.’

Gently nodded. ‘Now we’ll come to the body.’

Dick Middleton breathed a little faster. ‘It was lying there, the way I photographed it. What more can I tell you than that?’

‘Presumably you approached it.’

‘Well – yes.’

‘Didn’t you examine it for signs of life?’

‘My God I didn’t!’

‘Why not? The wound on the head might not have been fatal.’

‘But – but!’ His eyes were round. ‘You could *see* that it was fatal! It was into the brain, it must have been – he couldn’t have been alive, after that.’

‘You didn’t look for the exit wound?’

‘I tell you no!’

‘The exit wound should have been obvious. It would have been much larger than the entry wound and most likely would involve some collapse of the skull.’

Dick Middleton blanched. ‘I . . . didn’t see that!’

‘You didn’t turn the head or examine the injuries.’

‘No . . . no!’

‘You didn’t feel the pulse, or check for breathing?’

He swayed. ‘. . . no! I didn’t touch him.’

Gently nodded indifferently. ‘But you did see the entry wound and some blood draining from it. And the photograph was taken at fairly close range. What did you notice about the blood?’

Dick Middleton’s pale face blurred. ‘It . . . was running down his face. There wasn’t much of it.’

‘Running down?’

‘Yes . . . I suppose so.’

‘It could be important. Aren’t you certain?’

‘Yes . . . well . . . it had to be running.’ He gestured pleadingly. ‘I thought it was running.’

‘It hadn’t congealed.’

‘No . . . of course!’

‘You could see it was still wet.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘It had a glimmering appearance – say, like oil being poured from a bottle?’

His hand flickered about his face. ‘I don’t know . . . it was just blood.’

‘You saw it in sunlight.’

‘Just blood! It was wet . . . fresh . . . that’s all I know.’

‘And no breathing. No movement?’

‘Oh God!’ He covered his face with his hands.

Gently paused and eased comfortably in his chair. Over by the piano Aspall’s pencil was driving. Middleton *père*, his face switched off, sat stiffly twiddling his well-scrubbed thumbs.

‘So you didn’t examine the body closely . . .’

‘No . . . I’ve already said so!’

‘And naturally you were experiencing some apprehension that the killer was near by, and might attack you.’

‘Yes – yes, I was!’

‘Yet all the same you noticed the favourable photographic conditions and, putting your fears to one side, you took an excellent photograph of the body.’

* * *

Slowly Dick Middleton’s hands sank from his face. ‘You still – *still* don’t believe me, do you?’

Gently shrugged. ‘Your devotion to your craft was certainly remarkable in the circumstances.’

‘But I just took it – like that!’

‘The result was a print of some quality.’

‘I can’t help it. I simply whipped up the camera, adjusted the focus, and shot.’

‘Dick is a very good photographer,’ his father put in. ‘He’s used to taking action shots of birds.’

‘But with the knowledge of a gun possibly being trained on him?’

Middleton senior hooked his thumbs and was silent.

‘Look, I don’t know why I did it,’ Dick Middleton said. ‘It was a reflex action, that’s all. I’d come to get a photograph of the fellow, and there he was . . . so I took him.’

‘Your hands weren’t trembling.’

‘No – they wouldn’t! When you’re trained with a camera your hands lock steady. And then . . . well, I felt I ought to have a record, to show what happened. I *had* to take it.

Gently nodded. ‘Then you had evidence. To submit with your story to the police.’

‘I . . . I . . . well, it *was* evidence – even though I didn’t know what I was going to do with it.’

‘Surely that was obvious?’

‘I . . . no, it wasn’t!’ Suddenly his chin was stuck out again. ‘I know it should have been, but it involved Ka, and I wanted to hear her side of the story.’

‘For Miss Stoven you were prepared to withhold evidence.’

‘I had to give her a chance, don’t you see? That fellow was tied up with her in some way, but she needn’t have been to blame for what happened.’

‘But meanwhile the killer was getting away with it.’

‘I don’t care.’ The chin jutted firmly. ‘I didn’t believe that Ka was mixed up in it, and I wanted to be certain, and that’s that.’

‘It was an upsetting situation to be in,’ Middleton senior ventured. ‘You can’t blame the young man too much for being loyal.’

Gently gave him a hard stare; Middleton senior pursed his lips.

‘So now what did you do,’ Gently said. ‘You had discovered this crime and acquired some evidence.’

‘I wanted to see Ka,’ Dick Middleton said sulkily. ‘After that I was going to decide.’

‘You went in search of her?’

‘I went back to Sandlings. That’s where I expected her to be. But she wasn’t there, and when we rang her there was no reply from the cottage.’

‘Of course, you told Lionel Easton what you’d seen.’

‘Of course.’ Dick Middleton’s tone was sour. ‘Only he was as bad as you are – he insisted on seeing the body himself. I didn’t much fancy going back there, but that made him all the keener, so in the end we did go.’ He shrugged. ‘You can guess what

we found there.'

'The body had gone.'

'Yes. And I daresay that puts the tin hat on it. It did for Lionel in any case, and I can't expect any better from you.'

'But you could show him the print.'

Dick Middleton scowled. 'You don't think that would convince Lionel, do you?'

'It convinced our experts.'

He looked sceptical. 'Only Lionel specializes in making fakes! He does it with props and double exposures and that sort of kit. When he saw the print he laughed like a drain – he thought I'd been setting him up all along.'

'So he wouldn't swallow it.'

'Well, it puzzled him a bit that I wouldn't give in and admit the fake. That's why he sent a copy to you – to score off me, because I wouldn't give in.'

'Didn't he tell you he was sending it?'

'No, he didn't. Not till he'd put it in the post.'

'And you were angry?'

'Of course I was angry! But he only seemed to think that it proved his point.'

Gently paused, his eyes on the ceiling. 'But Miss Stoven would know that it wasn't a fake.'

'How could she know? She wasn't there. She'd gone out earlier, with Phil.'

'But surely she was able to tell you something?'

'I . . . no! I didn't ask her.'

'You didn't?'

The young man was scarlet, his wayward mouth quivering. 'No. You see, she came in later, when Mrs Easton was there – her and Phil – to explain why she'd cut her date with Lionel. Phil had called for her early on – while she was still at lunch, she said – and they'd gone to the reserve together to see a stork that had turned up. So I knew she was out when it happened – and well, I couldn't tackle her then. And afterwards . . . it was awkward, you see! I shouldn't have known that the fellow was staying with her.'

'It was none of your business.'

'No.'

'Even though you knew the fellow had been murdered.'

'Ka didn't know that!'

'But you say that you did.'

'Oh God – who else was going to believe it?'

Middleton senior cleared his throat at length. 'And that's probably the nub of it, Super,' he said mildly.

'Indeed?'

'Yes. When you come to think of it, Dick was in a very peculiar position. He was certain that the body he'd seen was genuine, but his best friend wouldn't take it seriously – and meanwhile the body vanishes without trace!' Middleton senior chuckled sagaciously. 'I don't know about you, Superintendent, but in a situation like that I wouldn't have been in a hurry to make an ass of myself.'

'You would prefer to forget what you'd seen.'

'Oh now, I didn't quite say that! But looking at it from Dick's point of view, I think I'd have been inclined to hold my horses. After all, if the man had really been shot, there'd almost certainly be an inquiry. And if there wasn't, then the odds would

be that it was all a hoax in the first place.'

Gently stared from father to son. '*Was* that how you viewed it?' he asked.

'I don't know!' Dick Middleton squirmed, his fingers digging into his thighs. 'I just didn't want to hurt Ka. I guessed she was implicated in some way. But not responsible – not that. And I didn't want to give her away.'

'But it did occur to you that you might have been hoaxed?'

'All right, it did. Yes, it did!'

'So which way do you want it written into the record?'

Dick Middleton met his eye. 'That man was *dead*.'

CHAPTER NINE

AND HE STUCK to that.

In the end, Aspall fetched a statement form from the car, and Dick Middleton recorded and signed his belief in writing as nervous, but as dogged, as himself. Claude Middleton watched the while; and when the job was done, ventured an ingratiating smile.

'Do you anticipate bringing charges . . .?'

'Not at this stage!' Gently grunted.

'But the possibility remains . . .?'

'Of course. Your son is an accessory by default, isn't he?'

Then they left as they had come, those two intrepid citizens of Grimchurch, father striding ahead of son; how could one doubt their complete integrity?

Behind Gently, Aspall shuffled the statement sheets.

'So what do we make of that, sir?'

Gently heaved an expressive shrug. What *could* you make of such an enigma? Since yesterday morning they'd identified the scene, named the victim and deduced a motive – and now they'd interrogated a virtual eyewitness: and still they didn't know where they stood!

'What's your opinion?'

Aspall had lit a fag; he took a few lungfuls before replying.

I'm not sure, sir. But you brought out one thing. The kid didn't look too hard at the body.'

'Not many people would have done, coming on it like that.'

'No sir. Especially kids of eighteen.'

'But they couldn't have known he'd photograph it.'

'It was on the cards, sir. He's a nut with a camera, and they knew that he'd have it with him.'

'But why bother to con Middleton?'

Aspall dragged more smoke. 'They'd want a witness who we could believe in, sir. No doubt they were hoping we'd never get round to him, but if we did – there he was.'

'Dick Middleton?'

'That's right, sir. I don't know about you, but I was believing him. He's too green, too easy to pump. He doesn't have gall enough to tell us a tale.'

Gently brooded. There was something in that! Dick Middleton was the model of a naive witness. If you primed him with the required material, he was bound to deliver it in a way that would convince . . .

'But if that's the case . . . where would it get them?'

Aspall puffed. 'Off the hook, I'd say, sir. We can't find the body, because there

isn't one, so all they've got to do is keep their traps shut.'

'But we do know of Sternfield's connection with the girl.'

'And the girl has cleared out for a spell, sir. Then, when Sternfield is fixed, she can turn up again with a tale about him spending a couple of nights with her. She has her alibi, don't forget. All she knows is that Sternfield left again. He didn't say anything about robbing any banks, and why would she sneak a look in his bag?'

'And suppose we catch up with him?'

'There's still no proof, sir. All we've got is Middleton's statement. And I reckon that if we laid our hands on Sternfield, we wouldn't waste a lot of beef about what happened here.'

Gently took some steps up and down the drab room. Aspall's view was certainly persuasive! Give the conspirators enough imagination to have made a tool of Middleton, and the plot was credible, might well have been tried.

'Sternfield got here on Thursday.'

'Yes sir. And young Middleton spotted him on Friday.'

'That was what started it.'

'Right, sir. They'd need to make some sort of move, after that. Young Middleton was in a stew about it, he was going to cause trouble. So they put their heads together and came up with this caper.'

'Easton, the girl and . . . Rushmere.'

'Yes sir. Rushmere would have to be part of it. I daresay they met together at her cottage that night, after young Middleton had gone home. Somehow they had to fix him – and fix it for Sternfield, too. His coming after Sternfield with a camera was just the angle they needed.'

'It still sounds a bit elaborate . . .'

'Look sir, follow it through! You've got Easton at his house, starting Middleton off, and then phoning to say that laddie's on his way. They can guess how long it will take him to get there, or perhaps the girl was keeping watch down the cliff. When he reaches the wood she gives the other two a wave, and then they go into their act. After the gunshot Rushmere takes cover, and the girl hides where she is.'

'The timing would be critical.'

'I don't know, sir. There's a view down the cliff from the top of the track.'

'What about the blood?'

'A squirt from a syringe. The hole in the head they could have faked earlier.'

Gently grunted. 'Too ingenious!'

'But it could have been worked, sir, that's what I'm saying. And then the rest falls into place, with Easton posting the photograph on Monday. Sternfield and the girl hang on for a day or two, giving us time to swallow the photograph, then they take off – and all we find here is a bullet and a credible witness.'

Gently took a few more strides. Yes . . . very nearly it could have been like that! Putting some other character in the place of Rushmere, and supposing singular trustingness on the part of Sternfield . . . He turned.

'So what would be your next move?'

'I'd have a go at young Easton, sir.'

'Then sometimes great minds *do* think alike!'

Aspall looked pained as he stubbed his fag.

Plus ça change . . .

Easton senior was the antithesis of Middleton *père*, yet clearly he came from the same box, took equal breaths of the Grimchurch air.

He answered the door, a plump, sharply dressed man with incipient jowls and a discreet moustache, sending before him an air of confident station and a whiff of fresh aftershave.

'Ah yes . . . you are the police officers?'

He regarded them with eyes that were firm but welcoming: a good man to present a rocky balance-sheet, to reassure the anxious with well-chosen words.

'Actually, we're having a bite . . . I suppose I couldn't persuade you to join us?'

The overlarge hall, with its black-and-white tiles, was the perfect frame for his port-wine manner.

'No doubt you'll have heard from Mr Middleton.'

'Claude rang me twenty minutes ago. This is a foolish business, Superintendent.'

'I wish to speak to your son.'

'Of course.'

He waved them into the lounge and switched on its row of chandeliers. Then, with a sort of polite haste, went to draw the long velvet curtains.

'May I bring you a tray . . .?'

'No thank you.'

'I would like to be present during this interview.'

'That's your privilege.'

'I appreciate it, Superintendent. Please make yourself comfortable while I fetch Lionel.'

He went out with the same deferential despatch, which nevertheless seemed to put one in one's place. Gently met Aspall's raised brows and shrugged faintly: you met them all in this line of business!

When he returned, five minutes later he was accompanied by his wife as well as his son, the former dressed now in a sheath-like gown with a plunge that the central heating made credible. She rustled forward smiling. Lionel Easton also smiled: really, it might have been a social visit! A pleasant group, they sought the big settee and sat, taking their time from Mrs Easton.

'May I put one question, Superintendent?' Cosmo Easton asked.

Gently shrugged his assent.

'Are you taking the line that this affair is serious, or do you see it as a foolish prank?'

Gently hesitated. That indeed was the question! And Cosmo Easton was watching him alertly. He made his face blank. 'I would scarcely be here unless we regarded it as serious.'

'But truly . . . serious?'

Gently said nothing.

'Well, that does surprise me, Superintendent! When Lionel explained it to me I formed a rather different opinion. No doubt you have reasons?'

'I have reason for being here.'

'Then of course we accept what you tell us. But I must admit to being puzzled. Lionel has never for one moment supposed it was serious.'

It was a good cue, and young Easton rose to it. 'I'm afraid I must admit that, sir,' he agreed. 'I thought at first that Dick was fooling me, and then perhaps that someone had fooled Dick.' He sank his head slightly. 'Sir, I'm sorry if I misled you this

morning. I didn't understand that it was so important, and I didn't want to give anyone away.'

Gently stared. 'And who is "anyone"?'

'Well . . . Dick, sir! And whoever was in it. I wasn't lying about the fellow in the photograph – I've never seen him before, that I know of.'

Mrs Easton smiled winningly. 'I think we can guess about the "anyone", Superintendent.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes. This will be one of Ka's little antics. Isn't that so, Lionel?'

Lionel Easton hesitated. 'She may have been teasing Dick, Mums.'

'Of course she was! The poor lamb is smitten with her, and she teases him high and low.'

'All the same . . . she wasn't there, you know.'

'Pooh! You've only her word for that.'

'And Phil's.'

'Phil is sweet on her too. He'd jump off the cliffs, if she asked him.'

There was silence. Mrs Easton's blue eyes were glinting, as though there was more that she could say. Her son's eyes were smiling, but his lips were tight. Cosmo Easton's plump face was merely plump.

'Of course, you know Mr Rushmere quite well . . .?'

Nobody rushed to answer the question. At last Cosmo Easton gestured a ringed hand. 'He used to work for a subsidiary of ours in Eastwich.'

'A subsidiary . . .?'

'Bramford Engineering. He's an engineering draughtsman by profession. He had some trouble, a nervous breakdown. Afterwards he took this job here.'

'What sort of trouble?'

Cosmo Easton shrugged.

'Wife trouble,' Mrs Easton said waspishly. 'We knew her, Hattie Rushmere. She nearly drove poor Phil dotty. She was hysterical and violent with it, the sort that try to destroy their men. She darned nearly succeeded. If you've talked to Phil you must have noticed how he is.'

'But they're living apart now?'

'Of course. She went off with an oil man, a proper thug. Phil was six months under treatment, then Cosmo got him appointed here.'

'The post seemed made for him,' Cosmo Easton said modestly. 'Painting birds had always been his hobby. He wanted to live alone, to find some peace. I'm glad to say it's worked out very well.'

'And now Miss Stoven provides consolation.'

Cosmo Easton looked down his nose. 'They're friendly, of course. She's a keen birdwatcher. I'm not sure that it goes further than that.'

'Oh Cosmo, it does!' Mrs Easton exclaimed.

'Perhaps you would know better than I do, my dear.'

'Yes – I would. You men are blind. He worships the very mud on her boots.' She flicked her hair. 'She isn't worth it, of course, and he's a fool to be taken in. Once or twice I've tried to drop him a hint, but Phil was born to be an ass about women.'

'Of course, there's an age difference . . .' Gently prompted.

'Yes. That makes it even worse. Phil is forty-seven, she's twenty-nine. The poor fool worships her like an idol. And of course she basks in it, and who can blame her?

But one day she'll let him down with a bang. Some young fellow will come along, and Phil will be out on his ear.'

'You think that . . .?'

'I'm certain of it. The pity is that Phil can't see it. He's never properly got over his other trouble, and here he is, sticking his neck out again.'

Gently nodded. 'He could go to pieces.'

'I'm afraid it's only too likely,' Mrs Easton sighed. 'It's a shame, but what can one say? Some people seem born to disaster.'

'I'm not so sure you're right, Mums,' Lionel Easton ventured. 'After all, Dick is stuck on the Dryad.'

'Yes, but she treats him as a joke,' Mrs Easton said. 'It makes Phil feel the inman. But for how long?'

'But Cora, there's this other young man,' Cosmo Easton objected. 'The one who all the fuss is about. If Dick's to be believed, he was staying with Ka, and Phil didn't seem upset over that.'

'Then he didn't know,' Mrs Easton said decidedly. 'Ka was keeping him out of sight.'

Her husband shook his head. 'That doesn't sound like Ka. She's always been a one for shaming the devil.'

* * *

This time the silence in the lounge was longer; one could hear the greasy ticking of a clock on the mantel. Cosmo Easton, whose remark had provoked the lapse, sat plumply staring at his well-shod feet. His wife appeared to be inspecting her hands, which she had spread on her knees. They were beautiful hands. Along with a wedding ring she wore another in which the stones were impressive. At last Lionel Easton looked up.

'I suppose, sir, you know who this fellow is . . .?'

Gently let the question hang a moment before returning: 'Don't you know?'

'No sir – I told you. I've never met him.'

'That's not quite the same thing, is it?'

'Sir?'

'You may have heard him spoken of. You too are a friend of Miss Stoven's.'

'But she never mentioned him.'

'She knew Dick Easton had seen him. You were on the phone to her after that.'

'But that was simply to invite her over – Dick was here—!'

'I mean after he'd gone.'

Lionel Easton simply looked puzzled. 'But I haven't phoned her again since then – that is, not except on Saturday, when we phoned to see if she was in.'

'Then didn't you meet her somewhere – say on Friday evening?'

'No. I didn't see her at all.'

'On Saturday morning?'

'You must believe me! Until Saturday teatime I didn't see her.'

Gently grunted incredulously. 'Then Mr Rushmere – perhaps you saw him at one of those times?'

Lionel Easton shook his head. 'I don't understand. I didn't see either of them until they called here.'

Was he telling the truth? He had an air of such frankness that one couldn't avoid a qualm of scepticism. And with the same honest, open expression he had told his lies

that morning . . .

'Perhaps you'll account for your movements last weekend. Beginning with Friday.'

'Certainly. I was in Eastwich on Friday. I drove home with father after business and stayed in all evening.'

'But you had a caller.'

'Well . . . Dick. Dick is always in and out. He told me what he'd seen at the cottage. He was very upset about it.'

'Where was the conversation held?'

'In the garage . . . I was tinkering with Floradora.'

'Who else was present?'

'Nobody. Mother and Father were in the house.'

'Your domestic . . . gardener?'

He shook his head. 'Mavis was in the scullery – we could see her. The gardener knocks off at four. Really, there was no one but Dick and I.'

Gently held his eye. 'This is important! Did you mention to *anyone* what he told you?'

'No – nobody! I mean, he might have been mistaken . . . and I didn't want to start gossip about the Dryad.'

'Dick is such a woolly young lamb!' Mrs Easton interposed. 'You have to think twice before taking him seriously. And of course he's mushy about Ka – it might have been the vicar he saw at the cottage.'

'He did describe him as a young man, Mums.'

'All the same, it could have been quite innocent. Someone collecting or selling insurance. It would take Dick to blow it up into a scandal.'

Lionel Easton moved his neat shoulders. 'Anyway, I didn't pass it on! But old Dick had got so worked up that I thought it would be amusing to josh him a bit. So I pretended to take him in. I knew Ka would want to see the Osborne report. I suggested inviting her over while Dick did a spot of investigating.'

'It was your idea?' Gently asked.

'Oh yes. Old Dick wouldn't have been so devious. But he fell for it, and we rang up Ka, and she agreed to come over after lunch next day.'

'She agreed quite freely?'

Lionel Easton paused. 'I had to persuade her a bit,' he admitted. 'I pretended that the report had to go back on Monday, and that on Sunday father would be working on it.'

'Did you get the impression that someone might be with her?'

'No, I didn't hear anyone else. But Ka was talking sort of hesitantly, picking her words. That was all.'

'Carry on.'

'Well, I thought Dick would cool, but he was still upset the next morning. In fact he would have liked to have gone off then to keep a watch on the cottage. But I laughed him out of that and made him sit around while I skinned the waxwing. Actually, I was getting a bit concerned. I felt he was working himself up to do something foolish.'

'It didn't occur to you to persuade him to drop it.'

'I don't think I could have done, sir, at that point. You see, he could sense that I wasn't convinced about the fellow, and he was determined to come back with a

photograph.'

'In fact he was conditioned to do just that.'

Lionel Easton stared for a moment. 'You could say that, sir, and perhaps I'm to blame. But I didn't intend to egg him on as far as I did.'

'Yet you could scarcely have done it better.'

'I can only repeat, sir, that it wasn't my intention. Honestly, I thought he would have backed out after he'd had a chance to sleep on it.'

Gently grunted. 'You were at home all the morning?'

'Yes of course. My parents can vouch for me.'

'That's so, Superintendent,' Cosmo Easton responded. 'Nobody went out before lunch on Saturday.'

'How many phone calls were made?'

'Well . . . we can try to add them up for you,' Cosmo Easton said. 'I rang the golf club at Wolmering, for a start, and my works manager, and Sandy Lodge.'

'And I rang the butcher,' Mrs Easton said brightly. 'And Lady Fulcher, who I called on after lunch. But Lionel was in his den with Dick till lunchtime. I don't see how he can have made any calls.'

'Did you?' Gently asked him.

'No – none!' Lionel Easton sat very straight. 'Sir, I can guess what you're thinking, but it isn't so. I had no part in it.

'Wasn't it you who primed Middleton to go spying with a camera?'

'I've admitted that, sir, and I'll take the blame. But I had nothing to do with faking the body, and I know nothing about who did.'

'Then can you explain how it all worked so neatly?'

'No sir. Only that it wasn't through me.'

'How could it have worked at all – without you?'

'Sir, I don't know. But that's how it was.'

Now his eyes were large and painfully steady, and for once there was a dash of colour in each cheek. His easy pose had stiffened, had become something more fragile. Cosmo Easton's hand fluttered.

'I realize you have to be severe, Superintendent, but Lionel is certainly telling the truth. He made no contacts other than Dick.'

'Perhaps you can explain the mystery, then,' Gently growled.

'I! I only wish I could.'

'Then be kind enough not to interrupt this interview.'

Cosmo Easton coloured but held his peace.

'So,' Gently resumed. 'All that morning you succeeded in keeping Middleton in check.'

Lionel Easton winced slightly. 'Yes sir. If that's how you care to put it.'

'He was being reserved for the afternoon.'

'That was how we planned it, sir. To get Ka away from the cottage. We didn't want her to catch Dick spying.'

'Carry on.'

Lionel Easton wet his lips. 'Dick went to lunch at twelve. We had an early lunch too, because Father and Mother were going out. So when he came back I was alone. But I hadn't rung or talked to anyone. I had brought my coffee in here . . . I was watching the TV soccer preview.'

‘At what time did he arrive?’

‘It was soon after one. Mavis let him in at the back. He was all togged up with his camera and gear, just as though he were going down to the reserve. I wanted him to watch the programme for a bit, but he was in too much of a state for that. Anyway, I made him sit down and drink some coffee. I was kidding him along, trying to smooth him down.’

‘What gear did he have with him?’

‘His camera and lenses, and binoculars.’

‘Nothing else?’

Lionel Easton stared.

‘Say something bulky in one of his pockets?’

‘I . . . I don’t think so.’ His mouth opened and shut. ‘You’re not suggesting . . . a gun?’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘I . . . it’s fantastic!’

‘Did you see something?’

‘No, I didn’t! Dick was wearing his Greenspot jacket, and there was nothing bulky in the pockets.’

‘Or under the jacket?’

‘No – nothing! And I would certainly have noticed a thing like that.’ But the fiery spots were back in his cheeks, and his eyes for a moment had a curious expression.

‘Has your friend ever owned a gun, then?’

‘Of course not! Dick would never shoot anything.’

‘All guns are not used for shooting birds. Some are intended for target practice.’

‘But . . . Dick just isn’t interested in guns.’

‘If Dick isn’t, who is?’

‘I . . . nobody – nobody around here. People simply don’t go in for guns at Grimchurch.’

‘They’re the ultimate form of sin,’ Mrs Easton smiled. ‘Anyone who owned a gun would be ostracized. Cosmo used to shoot pheasants in his wild Air Force days, but now he only shoots birdies on the greens.’

‘And I’m ashamed I ever did it,’ Cosmo Easton said tightly. ‘I don’t like to remember that I ever killed for sport.’

‘But the stricture wouldn’t apply to target-guns.’

‘Yes, because one thing can lead to another. There’s only one gun I know of in Grimchurch, and that’s kept strictly for shooting vermin.’

‘But there is one . . .?’

Cosmo Easton looked sulky. ‘Phil Rushmere keeps a four-ten. He had to rid the reserve of coypu, and there’s always a danger of others turning up.’

‘Just a four-ten?’

‘A four-ten is good enough. When you’re as quiet on the move as Phil is.’

Gently nodded and returned to Lionel Easton. ‘But you should know that Mr Rushmere has a gun?’

‘I . . . I . . . well!’ Lionel Easton stammered. ‘I didn’t realize you meant that sort of a gun.’

* * *

‘Carry on.’

Once more the ball was remorselessly laid at the young man’s feet. But now his

confident poise was fading and he seemed reluctant to continue play.

'Well . . . Dick went.'

'What time was that?'

'I suppose it was close on two.'

'Could you be more accurate?'

'No – not really! I kept him talking, like I told you. But he was determined to go through with it, and in the end he stalked out.'

'Going which way?'

'The cliff way, of course. I went with him down the garden. Then I came back into the house and got the report out, ready for Ka.'

'During that time you would be alone.'

'Well . . . yes. But there was Mavis.'

'You were in her company?'

'Not actually! She came in here to collect the cups.'

'But that was all – she collected the cups?'

'So she knew I was here – watching television.'

'Where do you keep your phone?'

'There's one down the hall, and one in the study.'

Gently paused. 'You know, I think you'd have rung Miss Stoven,' he said. 'She seemed reluctant when you invited her. You'd want to make sure she was on her way.'

'But I didn't – honestly!'

'You rang nobody?'

'No – you simply *must* believe me. I know I can't prove it, but it's true. I came back in here to watch the boxing.'

'The boxing?'

'The Strachey fight – the world championship. José Napoles.'

Gently nodded woodenly. 'And you were still watching it when Middleton returned?'

'Not the boxing. That was over. Then it was racing . . . Haydock Park.'

'About when?'

'I don't know. Yes . . . wait! It was the two-thirty. It had just finished when he came in – the two-thirty at Haydock Park!'

'Carry on.'

Lionel Easton took breath, his eyes no longer meeting Gently's. The flush spots on his cheeks were spreading to his close-set ears.

'He was puffed when he got here. He threw himself down on that chair. He was looking ghastly . . . what he said was "Nellie, someone's shot him – but it wasn't me!"'

'Nellie being your nickname.'

'Yes sir.'

'And those his exact words.'

Lionel Easton nodded helplessly. 'I can still hear him saying it . . .'

Gently checked briefly. 'And did you believe him?'

'Sir. . .?'

'When he said he hadn't done it?'

Lionel Easton's eyes were pitiful. 'Sir . . . I didn't believe any of it!'

'But by your own account he was very disturbed when he went off to the cottage –

and he came back "looking ghastly". Surely you had some reason to doubt?'

Lionel Easton swayed a little. 'Sir . . . I didn't . . . it didn't occur to me! It was so . . . grotesque. Right at that moment I couldn't really take it in.'

'But when you did?'

'Then I thought that Dick believed it . . . that someone had played him a trick. Not . . . the other. I just didn't think it . . . it wasn't possible. Not Dick!'

Gently gestured boredly. 'So what did he tell you?'

'He told me he'd heard the fellow being chased . . . then a shot. And when he got there the fellow was dead, shot through the head.'

'Did he tell you who was chasing him?'

'He didn't see who! And when he got there the other man had vanished. Dick was scared, he didn't hang about. He took the photograph and raced back here.'

'A natural reaction.'

'Yes – for Dick. And I would have done the same thing.' Lionel Easton stared with a flash of defiance. 'Perhaps you ought to be grateful that he took that photograph.'

Gently hunched. 'So you decided he'd been tricked.'

'Yes.' Lionel Easton's eyes dropped again. 'I mean, it was all so . . . melodramatic. One just doesn't run into freshly shot bodies. So I insisted on seeing it, and he tried to put me off, which made me even more suspicious. In the end he took me to the spot, and there was no trace of it. It *had* to be a joke.'

'What time did you get there?'

'Well, after three . . . we probably spent ten minutes jawing. Perhaps twenty-past three. The fellow and his pal had plenty of time to sheer off.'

'There was no one.'

He shook his head.

'At the cottage.'

'It was empty and locked.'

'And you didn't look in the garage.'

'Yes, I did. The car was out.'

The clock with the greasy ticking chimed, and Cosmo Easton promptly rose.

'This is dry work, Superintendent . . . do let me fetch you a Scotch.'

Gently said nothing. Cosmo Easton crossed to the illuminated cabinet. On a silver salver he mixed drinks, giving them adroit squirts from a siphon. Mrs Easton smiled brightly at nobody. Lionel Easton sat still and straight. He had controlled the flush in his cheeks but his mouth was still tight, his gaze lowered. When his father returned he accepted a beer and a look passed between them. Gently accepted his Scotch. Cora Easton had a gin and lime.

'Cheers, Superintendent . . .!'

Gently grunted and barely tasted his Scotch. Lionel Easton gulped beer as though his mouth were very dry. In his corner, Aspall sipped a Scotch with absent concentration. For a moment, a hiatus. Yet the tenseness hadn't relaxed.

Gently set his glass beside him.

'And all this while . . . no hint of it being a hoax from Middleton.'

Lionel Easton nursed his glass determinedly. 'Sir, Dick was convinced all along.'

'Yet he didn't convince you.'

'Well . . . no, sir. Especially after I'd seen the print. It was the sort of thing you

could easily fake with modelling clay and a squeeze of ketchup.'

'The sort of thing you're good at.'

Lionel Easton drank. 'But I wasn't there, sir. I couldn't have done it.'

'You could have devised it for someone else.'

Lionel Easton kept drinking.

'What made you post the print to us?'

'I . . . I'm not quite certain, sir.'

'Because you thought it showed a corpse or because you didn't?'

He twisted the glass between his palms. 'I suppose I wasn't quite sure, sir. Not absolutely. Most of me thought it was a hoax. But it just mightn't have been. Somehow . . . I thought I ought to let you see it.'

'Because Middleton was so positive?'

He shook his head. 'Dick can be an awful ass.'

'Was it something in Miss Stoven's behaviour?'

The glass was still. 'I can't think what . . .'

'How many times did you see her afterwards?'

'Only that once. That same afternoon. When she came in from the reserve to explain why she hadn't turned up.'

'Because of the stork.'

'Yes . . . she seemed very excited about that. She isn't usually an excitable person. But I suppose a stork is quite rare.'

'She was certainly in a whirl,' Mrs Easton smiled. '*I* thought she'd had one or two to drink. Or perhaps that Phil had popped the question. Only Phil was all quiet and serious.'

'Yes . . . Phil was quiet,' Lionel Easton said.

'Not quite approving,' his mother said. 'Perhaps he'd popped the question and she'd turned him down. Actually, they weren't here very long.'

'Can you estimate the time?'

'Oh, fivish. They were talking football on the telly.'

'Final Score,' Lionel Easton said. 'They left again before it was over.'

'And that's the last you've seen of her,' Gently said.

Lionel Easton sipped before nodding. 'I . . . haven't gone out of my way to see her. I just wasn't certain . . . well, what to think. It really all depended on what Dick told me . . . except that this fellow was on the photograph. It was awkward. I didn't want to poke my nose in . . . it wasn't my affair, after all.'

'Yet you sent us the photograph.'

He sipped some more.

'Sir, I've told you all I know. I'm pretty certain it's nothing serious and that somebody was out to give Dick a scare. But if it is . . . more than that . . . I'll swear that Ka has nothing to do with it . . . probably doesn't know it's happened. I just hope you find her soon.'

'You won't add to that?'

'I can't, sir.'

'Like who might own a certain gun?'

Lionel Easton's eyes were large. But in the end he shook his head.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GREASY-TICKING clock had chimed eight before they were through with Lionel Easton's statement. The process was attended throughout by Cosmo Easton and his agreeable wife. They didn't interfere, they offered no comment, they whispered few words to each other, but they were there: never relaxing for a moment the atmosphere of benevolent co-operation. The affluent, law-supporting middle-class . . .! Cosmo Easton and Claude Middleton. Whose sons apologized for misdemeanours that were, after all, mere freaks of high spirit.

Marx could come and Marx could go, but the axis of the world was Easton–Middleton . . .

A frosty moon was glimmering mistily when they returned to the opaque-windowed car. Aspall went round the windows with a chamois leather while Gently sat brooding in the icy interior. Aspall climbed in.

'What now, sir . . .?'

'I'm damned hungry!' Gently growled.

They drove back to the village, a distance insufficient to stir warmth from the car's sluggish heater.

Coloured lights decked the front of the pub and its park was full of cars. From the saloon came the tinkle of a piano and the sound of voices in wavering chorus. In the hall they were met by the landlady.

'There's a man from a paper wants to see you, sir.'

'Keep him off me! Can you manage some food?'

'There are hot pies, sir . . .'

'Send some in.'

Warren, Campsey and the six men sat about the private room, glooming over pints. They too had been indulging in pies: crumby plates were scattered over the small tables. Warren rose.

'The warrants are here, sir. Do you want us to get weaving?'

'They'll keep. What else?'

'Sweet Fanny Adams I'm afraid, sir.'

In fact they'd scoured the wood and its vicinity from Sandlings almost to the village: six fed-up men and a sergeant, all of whom should now be off duty. And for a body that might be a rumour . . .! No wonder they sat and stared at their pints.

The pies came, and a couple of jars. Gently ate and drank with absent eyes. Aspall, dying to talk, was obliged to contain himself, because plainly Gently didn't mean to respond. Yet what was there to say . . .? At each step forward you found yourself just where you were before, unless . . . No, nothing to talk about! But perhaps a moment of decision . . .

And somehow, that feeling pervaded the room, inhibiting the others as they

lounged at their tables. Nobody was talking, the time for it was past: now they were waiting, sensing . . . what?

'Sir . . . this reporter . . . if you're ready to see him?'

Gently pushed his plate aside. He knew the reporter, a wasp-waisted young man with a scar-damaged eyelid, looking like a cast.

'Chiefie, nobody seems to know what's cooking . . .'

Everyone was watching the interview with interest. Aspall, mug in hand, never took his eyes off Gently's face.

'We've received information of a death in the village.'

'Oh come on, Chiefie! That's stalling.'

'I have been detailed to investigate the report.'

'Some hard stuff, Chiefie. Something to print . . .!'

Picking his words, he gave a summary that the paper would be only too eager to print. The reporter, his object achieved, scribbled away with happy industry. And the room listened silently. From across the hall came the piano's tinkle and some muffled singing, but in the room there was only Gently's measured tones and the rustle of the pencil.

'This Sternfield . . . they're sure he did the bank job?'

'Sternfield is wanted in connection.'

'That's the same . . . can we say he's her boyfriend?'

'Miss Stoven and he are known to have been acquainted.'

'Who sent you the pic?'

'It was sent anonymously.'

'Now, Chiefie! You must know who.'

'There may be later information.'

'Can we print the pic?'

'The Inspector will give you an artist's impression.'

Back and forth, a contest of wits that both had engaged in before, of which both knew the rules, would exploit them to the full. At last the reporter rested his pencil.

'Oh . . . there's just one more thing, Chiefie. At HQ they didn't seem able to tell me . . . you are treating this as murder, aren't you?'

Was he? The query in Aspall's eye was ten times sharper than that in the reporter's. Warren, Campsey and the six men, all were listening and watching like lynxes.

'I should have thought that was plain.'

'We like to be sure, Chiefie. Of course, we would have inferred it anyway.'

'Now you can print it in so many words.'

'Roger, Chiefie.'

And that was that.

'Sergeant Warren and two constables. The rest of you can go.'

Still, he didn't want to discuss it, to explain the logic of the decision. Not that it carried much logic, being based on impressions as much as fact, on readings of character . . . a hunch, if you liked! Though the logic was there in the background . . .

'The cottage first, sir?'

'Of course.'

The cottage might put fresh cards in their hand. Then, after that, they could proceed to the bird-warden's . . . arriving late, as he was about to retire.

Oh yes, the gloves were off now! Any trick that shortened the course was worthwhile.

Warren drove with them in the squad car. The two men followed in Campsey's Panda. They met no other vehicle on the dark road to the cottage. In the blackness of the sky, away north, winked the red eye of Wolmering's lighthouse, but that vanished behind trees when they turned into the lane. They parked and cut their lights: then it was darkness indeed. The moon was lost in cloud, the cottage a shape barely visible.

'Bring a hand lamp.'

'Yes sir.'

Its beam pencilled across the garden. Raking shadows from the rose bushes moved with them as they advanced, Warren tried the green door perfunctorily before fetching out his keys. They stood waiting in the frost while he juggled with them for, it seemed, a long time. The door opened. Warren found a switch: light overflowed from a narrow hall.

'Take a room apiece.'

Already briefed, they spread out to begin their task. In every room lights blazed, dully revealing the gardens without. And you could smell the tension of that moment. 'Perhaps what we've been looking for' was the briefing Gently had given them. One body . . .? Two . . . That was certainly how they had interpreted it!

But the moment passed, and there was no hurried summons from rooms, upstairs or down. Just trampling feet, and the incidental sounds of drawers, cupboards being opened and closed.

As yet, no sensational climax! With this case it wasn't going to be so simple . . .

He joined Aspall in the parlour. The cottage was icy and smelled faintly of soot. The parlour was a largish, low-ceilinged room with a big open hearth in which there was wood-ash. Before it stood a wooden settle, its seat cluttered with flowered cushions, and a couple of chairs. Near the window stood a desk, the drawers of which Aspall was rifling. And bookcases of course, on every wall. And Beardsley prints, four of them.

And here she'd lived, all alone . . . What there wasn't was a television. Just books. All of Lawrence and a couple of shelves about him . . . Mansfield, Murry . . . and poets by the yard.

Alone, provided for, scribbling her verse, watching birds: handing off the young men who admired her, and doubtless an older man, too . . .

Frigid, perhaps? Lesbian? No hint of that yet. But odd in some way, an eccentric . . . one who might not go by the book . . .

And then, picking up a photo-wallet from one of the bookcases, he found himself staring at her: a slightly pugnacious-faced young lady with straight dark hair, cut in a fringe. No doubt of who it was – it was signed Ka, and embossed with the name and address of a Wimbledon photographer. She stared back at him with cool dark eyes that looked a little uneven, one more hooded than the other. Not quite pretty – the jaw too broad, the nose and chin too prominent – yet striking, sharply intelligent, with a dimple or twist to the side of her mouth. And the signature, a powerful 'K' followed by an 'a' precisely articulated.

'Sir, these'll be some of Sternfield's letters . . .'

Aspall was poring over a bunch on the desk. They were written on pink paper and had been bundled together with a piece of tape.

'He sounds a bit of a case. But he was gone on her when he wrote them.'

‘When was that?’

‘Dated last year, sir.’

But she hadn’t thrown them away.

Gently examined one of the letters: it began ‘My Goddess’, and was written in a looping, back-slanted hand. This one was dated in September and referred to some occasion when the recipient had been ‘cruel’ and had ‘touched me with a nettle’. It continued in a high-flown style and was signed, with flourishes, ‘Your Ericdymion’.

‘What’s the date of the latest one?’

‘Feb of this year, sir. Sounds like he’d got his marching orders.’

The letter was a long, flowery complaint that seemed too unreal to contain true feeling.

‘Don’t reckon he’d got very far with her, sir. You don’t write that sort of bilge when you’re in.’

‘Perhaps he knew the lady better than we do.’

‘She’d have to be a weirdo to fall for that.’

‘Perhaps she was . . .’

Aspall grunted – if that was the case, you could keep her! He jumbled the letters together again and knotted the tape around them contemptuously.

‘Then there’s these letters from her mamma – not very affectionate they are, sir – and some bank sheets – she’s doing all right – and stuff from her broker, and a printer at Lewes.’

‘Who’s he?’

Aspall flicked open a file. ‘The Rodmell Press, sir. Anthony Firle. Where she gets her poetry printed – there’s a receipt here for a job in August.’

‘And the rest of it?’

Aspall wagged his head. ‘Author’s manuscripts, I reckon you’d call it! Stories, bits of writing . . . there’s enough to paper a house. Then there’s this.’

He uncovered a bound volume. It was a manuscript book part-filled with verse, poems inscribed in the same firm hand as that appearing briefly on the photograph. Her proper book, no doubt, into which the finished poems went. The poems were dated. Gently turned to the last one: the date was that of the day before.

‘She must have been here yesterday . . .’

They stared at each other.

‘Not while we were here, sir,’ Aspall said, heavily.

‘That was from quarter-past eleven till dusk.’

‘She must have cleared out before we arrived.’

That was the most probable: and the icy chill of the place confirmed it. Miss Stoven had departed in the morning, leaving those ashes to go cold on her hearth. By half an hour, it might be, they had missed her, and perhaps had passed her on the road . . .

‘Well, she was safe and sure of herself then, sir.’

They brooded over the last poem. Certainly the handwriting was even and confident, but the content . . . what was that saying?

The elms disrobe and re-embrace the sky;
The sun peers sidelong, and the field fares cry;
The west wind strokes the air with flakes of gold,
But not a leaf that falls is lost as I.

I would that some hoar dew or tyrant rain
That beats the earth asleep, to dream again,
And sets it working to another Spring,
Would spare some opiate for my shaken brain.

The door of Summer closes, and a door
On the long dream of life that went before;
I call, but no god answers, and the song
I hear not, catch the Orphic strain no more.

Written on the Saturday, if the meteorological detail had any significance, and copied out on the Wednesday morning, her last act before leaving the cottage . . .

Gently flicked backwards. Earlier poems were largely evocations of scene and season. But there were two, two immediately preceding, that struck a much more personal note. Beside him, Aspall read frowningly.

'Don't reckon she wrote them about Sternfield, sir.'

'No . . . not Sternfield.'

'It would have to be Rushmere. And if he felt the same way, that could be a motive.'

'Jealousy . . .?'

'Well, Sternfield came here, and it doesn't look like she turned him away.'

Gently hunched. 'She might have let him stay and still not have jumped into bed with him.'

'But did Rushmere know that?'

Gently was silent. Had Rushmere read those two sonnets? The money was not a motive that Gently would have ascribed to him, but the loss of such tenderness . . . might that not fit?

They ruffled through the Dryad's books, but no cascade of banknotes tumbled out. Gently left Aspall poking round the chair cushions and strolled down the hall to the kitchen. All had been left neat. Dishes were washed and replaced on the dresser. In the small refrigerator there was butter and cheese, but no milk bottles in the gallery allotted to them. An enamelled bread bin stood empty, its lid tilted for ventilation, and the dish cloth had been squeezed out and spread at the side of the sink to dry. Gently touched it automatically: still a residue of dampness. A pad calendar hanging on the door was still exhibiting Tuesday's date.

'Sir . . .?'

He returned to the hall: Warren was leaning over the bannister.

'Sir, the spare room has been occupied. Someone has stripped the bed.'

It was a small, barely furnished room overlooking the back garden. Sheets and pillowcase had been taken from the bed and dumped carelessly in a corner.

'Have you handled much?'

'No sir. And the door stood open.'

'Tomorrow, have it checked for latents.'

'Yes sir. I'll warn the others.'

Next door was the tiny bathroom, also looking to the rear – a five-foot bath, washbasin and a WC, with bare standing room. Also neat, and smelling of lavender. No sponge bag hanging behind the door. No soap, no facecloth, no toothbrush in a glass on the shelf . . .

‘Sergeant!’

‘Yes sir?’

‘Put this on the list.’

But it was a long shot at that.

Then her bedroom across the landing. This was a more interesting room – a handsome bed with a plumply padded headboard, fitted wardrobe and dressing table, and white-and-gilt chairs. Also a bookcase – it was full of classical translations – and a bedside cabinet stuffed with paperbacks. The floor was furnished with a spongy pink carpet and the windows draped in old-rose brocade.

‘What’s in the wardrobe?’

One of the DC’s was seated on the floor, surrounded by drawers. The other had lugged a store box from under the bed and was on his knees, rummaging through blankets.

‘Plenty of clothes, sir . . .’

But also empty hangers, three of them, just inside the door; and among the dresses and skirts, no coat; and no suitcase, no brushes.

The room had a powdery odour, faintly sour, like privet. Of two pictures one was a line drawing, apparently of herself, and unsigned.

An interesting room . . . Yet the component parts were nothing if not commonplace. Perhaps the interest arose from his having just read the poems, stared into the unequal eyes of the writer . . .

Aspall joined him.

‘Not very much here, sir.’

After their expectations, the cottage was a let-down. Its innocence was depressing – all they had found here they might have guessed without crossing the threshold.

‘At least we know now that she left voluntarily.’

‘Well yes, sir, there is that . . .’

And the poem, of course, with its overtones of crisis – though it might equally well refer to a lover’s tiff!

‘Who’s searched the loft?’

No one, it seemed. The entry to the loft was rather awkward: a trap door in the ceiling, more over the stairs than over the landing.

‘Sergeant Warren and one of you . . .’

They fetched a chair and Sergeant Warren mounted. Armed with the hand lamp, he disappeared, and they could hear his wary tread on the rafters. A distant clang doubtless signified a collision between the hand lamp and the plumbing, then there was silence, with only a faint gleam from the lamp visible above.

‘Anything there?’

‘Just a minute, sir . . .’

His voice sounded stifled; one imagined him bent double, his fingers groping through the dust of ages. A moment later his footsteps returned.

‘Someone to take something, sir . . .’

What he handed down was a very dusty Walther ·22 target-pistol.

* * *

It was handed by a pencil inserted in the barrel, and by the pencil Gently took it. But its film of fluffy dust suggested that useful latents would be unlikely. Very delicately, he pressed the catch and eased out the magazine. Loaded, with one shot gone. The shells matched the shell they had found at the scene.

‘Where was it lying?’

A grimy Warren swung from the trap to make a clumsy landing.

‘Over by the tank, sir. I reckon someone slung it there. The dust on the rafters wasn’t disturbed.’

‘What else is up there?’

‘Nothing, sir. Just the tank and a load of muck.’ He flicked at himself distastefully and wiped his blackened hands.

Meanwhile Aspall was staring at the Walther. ‘Look sir . . . on the barrel!’

On the barrel were smeared stains, rusty brown, still tinged with red.

‘Blood . . .’

Small doubt of that! In his haste, the killer had neglected to wipe it. It had been thrown down, to be perhaps forgotten until the wet smears had dried. First, he’d had to get rid of the body, and there couldn’t have been much time. At any moment, after Middleton had left, he could expect the hue and cry . . .

‘Sir, you were right . . .’

Gently grunted. He’d played so many hunches before! But Aspall was staring at the bloodstains as though they were signs and marvels.

‘Chummie must have put the gun to Sternfield’s head . . .’

‘The blood could have got on it afterwards.’

‘My God . . . what *did* happen out there!’

‘Someone shot Sternfield. With his own gun.’

But Aspall was seeing it for the first time, mirrored there in the brown smears: there was a dazedness in his eyes and his rubbery mouth drooped.

‘Give me a bag.’

Campsey handed him one, together with a label to go in it. Everyone was crowding on the small landing, shoving to get a glimpse of their find. With them, too, it was sinking in – now they were no longer chasing moonbeams! That body they’d been going through the motions of searching for really existed, was to be found . . .

‘Get this to forensic.’

‘Yes sir.’

Warren took the bag and hurried down the stairs.

‘The room at The Fisherman will be the incident room. I want one of you to man the phone.’

One of the DC’s followed Warren. In a moment, they could hear an engine starting. Gently leaned on the landing rail and comfortably filled and lit his pipe.

All was well! The cottage, after all, had yielded its vital clue.

Now he was ready to talk to Rushmere . . . but there was no hurry about that.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN FACT IT was after eleven when they bumped down the lane in Campsey's Panda. A light was still showing, however, in the bird warden's red-curtained window. He must have heard the car, because the curtain twitched, and there was a brief glimpse of his curious face. Then, at Gently's rap, the door flew open and they found themselves staring into the muzzle of a shotgun.

'Stand back or I fire!'

'We are the police, Mr Rushmere.'

'I don't know that. Stand back! If you're a policeman, show your warrant.'

He must have recognized Gently by now, but the gun remained pointed firmly. And the eyes, apparently so inadequate by day, seemed now to be functioning in their proper element. When Gently moved his hand to his pocket the muzzle shifted, covering.

'Hold it to the light.'

On the wall behind Rushmere a small oil lamp glimmered. Gently thrust the warrant towards it. The birdman barely gave the paste board a glance.

'So what do you want – at this time of night?'

'Couldn't we talk inside, Mr Rushmere?'

'No we can't – till I know your business! And you've no right to force your way in.'

'We think you can help us with information.'

'What – it needs four of you for that?'

'Also, we have a warrant to search the premises.'

'That's very likely. Who would give you one?'

Gently shrugged and presented the search warrant. This time Rushmere's perusal was keener. But his gaze was divided between it and Gently, and the muzzle of the shotgun kept thrusting.

'And if I say you can't?'

'We shall enter anyway.'

'Don't think I shall hesitate to pull this trigger. What you are doing is most irregular. You aren't supposed to come here in the middle of the night.'

Campsey eased forward into the lamplight. 'Now you know me, Mr Rushmere,' he said. 'All this business is quite in order. You don't have to keep us out with a gun.'

'I don't know these other men!'

'They're policemen, sir. I wouldn't be here with them if they weren't. And that's my car down at the gate. And that gun isn't loaded, sir – is it?'

And suiting action to words, the excellent Campsey held out his hand and took the gun. Unhurriedly he broke it. The breech was empty. He snapped it shut and gave it

back to Rushmere.

‘But I still regard this as gratuitous harassment!’

He had backed off now into the cottage’s parlour. It was a room of character, perhaps made the more so by being lit only by an antique brass lamp. A log fire smouldered in the brick hearth and books crowded among the shadows. On the table under the lamp lay an open sketch pad, surrounded by tubes, brushes, palette and pots. A warm room: it struck you with its atmosphere of woodsmoke and paraffin oil.

‘Are you living alone here?’

‘What? Of course!’

‘Then you won’t mind if we begin the search.’

‘Oh yes I do—!’

‘We shall take great care. Your belongings will not be unnecessarily disturbed.’

He stood glaring helplessly while they dispersed and began methodically to take the cottage apart. Not that it was an easy one either, when there was no lighting in any of the rooms! Gently strolled through. A cold-water kitchen, with a zinc bath hanging on the wall – the sink a qualified antique, and pemmon floor tiles that smelled of carbolic. Then the bedroom, cold as nip, and no sign of any heater: a single bedstead with coloured blankets and, lying on them, a sleeping bag. Tidy, bleak and primitive described the bird-warden’s cottage. All the comfort was in the parlour: to the parlour Gently returned.

‘So have you pried round everywhere?’

Gently shrugged and went to warm himself at the fire. ‘Do you mind if I smoke . . .?’

‘Does it matter if I do mind?’

The birdman was quivering with frustrated rage.

Gently lit his pipe from the fire: a jar of spills stood in the grate. He stood puffing, gazing round the room. It was certainly a hotchpotch of a place! In one corner stood a roll-top desk smothered with leaflets, notebooks, letters; in another a small bench with an embossing press, boxes, and an unusual pair of pliers. And books . . .! Mostly on ornithology, with Witherby holding pride of place. But no pictures. A Scotsman calendar was all that decorated the distempered walls.

Gently nodded to the sketch pad. ‘You’re an artist, then.’

‘What can that matter to you?’

‘In Miss Stoven’s bedroom hangs a drawing of herself. I suppose it wouldn’t be one of yours?’

Rushmore checked, his eyes searching. ‘When were you in that room?’

‘About an hour ago.’

‘She . . . she’s back, then?’

Gently puffed and moved to the table.

‘Yes . . . this resembles the style. Same feeling and quality of line. With a faint echo of Beardsley. She’s an admirer of Beardsley, isn’t she?’

‘*Is she back*?’

‘Of course, in this job . . . these are the avocets, aren’t they? I mean, you can spend all day taking notes . . . and who’s to bother you of an evening?’

‘Will you answer me!’

‘Where’s your bird register?’

‘My what?’

‘Your record of bird movements. You keep one, don’t you?’

Rushmere’s mouth gaped and he rocked slightly, his fingers snatching.

‘Yes, I keep one! What about it?’

‘Over here is it – on the desk . . .?’

The birdman moved smartly to grab for a plastic-bound notebook, but somehow Gently’s hand got there first.

‘Yes . . . this is what I was after. This would be part of the job, wouldn’t it? Keeping an eye on the bird population, movements, numbers, departures, arrivals . . .’

‘Just give it here!’

‘No – wait. Look, you’ve missed something out on Saturday. Movements of geese, waders, buntings etc. – but no mention of the stork.’

‘So I didn’t record it!’

‘Why not? Wasn’t it the high spot of the day?’

‘It – it didn’t actually enter the reserve. It was on some fields, out behind here.’

‘I see. Where only you would have seen it.’

‘Perhaps you’re forgetting Miss Stoven.’

Gently tossed the notebook back on the desk. ‘No, I’m not forgetting Miss Stoven. But I can’t help wondering about the value of her evidence. Do you think I should rely on it?’

‘What – what has she said?’

‘That’s just the problem,’ Gently mused. ‘She hasn’t said anything. Miss Stoven is as silent as the grave – she couldn’t say less if she were dead.’

Rushmere jerked his face away. ‘She hasn’t come back, has she?’ he said. ‘You’re trying to bluff me, that’s all. You think I may say something that will damage her.’

‘Is there any way she can be damaged?’

‘At least, you seem to think so! Haven’t you just been searching *her* cottage?’

Gently stared at him. And nodded.

The fire had been allowed to burn low, but there was a basket of sawn logs by the hearth. Gently selected a fat cylinder of pine and set it squarely in the ashes. Rushmere watched. His eyes were very distant. Little blue flames began to play along the log.

‘Why don’t we sit down . . .?’

From above came the occasional tramp and voice of a searcher. Down here the atmosphere had a sort of thickness, a texture contributed by the lamp.

‘Why should I?’

‘There’s talking to do . . .’

‘But I’ve got nothing to say to you.’

‘Oh yes. You’ve got more to tell me about what happened at Miss Stoven’s on Saturday.’

‘I’m saying nothing.’

‘Take that chair. We may as well have our chat in comfort.’

The birdman gave a pettish little shrug, then plonked himself on the chair. Gently sat too. He relit his pipe and dropped the spill in the flames. For a while he sat gazing at the log, from which yellow resin had begun to ooze.

‘Now . . .’

‘You’re simply wasting your time!’

‘Just tell me exactly when you got to her cottage.’

‘I did tell you – around two o’clock.’

‘No . . . I mean the time when you *really* got there.’

Rushmere sat back with an affronted expression. There was something quite childish about his beaky face, a sulky naivety. And because of those eyes, you felt he was somehow out of reach . . .

‘All right, then! It could have been a little earlier.’

‘Did Sternfield know you were going to call?’

‘Sternfield . . .? Who is Sternfield?’

‘Miss Stoven’s ex-boyfriend from Wimbledon.’

His mouth gaped open. ‘This is fantasy!’

‘It was him you were going to see, wasn’t it? Once we’ve got rid of the stork-that-wasn’t and an alibi that wouldn’t fool a child?’

‘But that’s pure invention!’

‘I invented Sternfield?’

‘Yes – I know nothing of any such person.’

‘What’s in those boxes standing on the bench?’

‘What – what? They’re aluminium blanks!’

Gently rose and went to the bench. The boxes contained strips in several sizes. He placed one in the press and operated the lever: the strip came out embossed with letters and figures.

‘For ringing the birds . . .?’

‘Exactly!’

‘And these are the pliers you put them on with?’

‘If it’s any concern of yours . . . yes!’

‘When did you last ring birds in the Priory Wood?’

‘I . . . I . . .!’

He jumped to his feet and took several quick steps away from the hearth. For some moments he stood in the shadows, his face turned towards the wall.

‘You’re trying to trap me!’

‘Come and sit down. You do ring birds in the wood, don’t you?’

‘Yes I do – and why shouldn’t I?’

‘No reason at all. So sit down.’

After another pause he swung round defiantly and strutted back to his chair. Gently returned with one of the blanks. He puffed a few times, toying with it.

‘When were you last in the wood, then?’

‘I don’t recall when I was last in the wood.’

‘You’d carry these about in your pocket, would you? I mean, it would be easy to drop one.’

Rushmere clamped his lips tight.

‘In a way, it would be a sort of signature. Nobody else in the village carries these strips, so where we found one, you must have been.’

‘But that proves nothing! I’m often in the wood.’

‘Of course. No reason for it to have been Saturday.’

‘Then why are you hounding me?’

‘We found it behind bushes, just off the track. Where someone might have hidden.’

‘It still – proves nothing!’

Gently puffed. ‘So let’s get back to Eric Sternfield.’

Rushmere’s eyes gazed into nothing, and his small mouth became smaller. Half-lit, half-shadowed, his face looked grotesque: more like a blunt-beaked bird’s than ever. His hands, large but fine boned, were draped angularly across his thighs.

‘Well . . .?’

‘I’ve nothing to say!’

Gently nodded, nostrilling smoke. ‘He’d slept at her cottage a couple of nights. He came here on Thursday. Did you know that?’

‘I know of no such person.’

‘We found his letters. She’d kept them all, tied up with a ribbon. Very emotional. They must have been close, back in the old days at Wimbledon. She was his goddess, he was her shepherd . . . ridiculous, except to those concerned!’

‘I don’t want to hear that!’

‘He was younger, of course – a matter of five years between them. But no woman minds being regarded as a goddess, especially one who saturates herself in Keats. I’d say – from the letters – that he didn’t want for encouragement. He’d found the key to which she responded.’

‘Please – I don’t want to *hear*!’

‘So when he was in trouble, where would he go? If she’d responded once, she’d respond again, that was the way young Sternfield saw it. And he was right, wasn’t he? Because his robbing the bank really made her sit up and take notice. Before, she’d thought him a bit milk-and-watery, but now he’d cut a proper dash! More of a Daphnis than an Endymion. No wonder he swept her off her feet.’

‘No!’

‘It wasn’t like that?’

‘She . . . you don’t have any idea!’

‘But she went along with him, didn’t she?’

‘That was because . . .!’ He broke off abruptly, mouth snapping tight.

‘Because of her kind heart, you were going to say?’

Rushmere moaned through his teeth.

‘I can understand that,’ Gently said agreeably. ‘No doubt her kind heart was well to the fore. Sternfield was in trouble, he needed reassurance, and an old flame would know what to do about that.’

‘You . . . you . . . you’re slandering a wonderful person!’

‘Are you telling me he held her up with the gun?’

‘No . . . not . . .!’ Once again Rushmere’s mouth closed like a trap.

‘I see,’ Gently mused. ‘The gun came into it. Well, we found the gun . . . did I tell you? Still smeared with Sternfield’s blood. Why didn’t you throw it in the sea, by the way?’

Rushmere moaned.

‘We’ll need your fingerprints, of course.’

He gave a little cry and clutched his hands together.

‘And it would help to know what you did with the money.’

‘The money . . .’

‘Yes.’

He closed his mouth.

Aspall came through the door and, catching Gently’s eye, shrugged. He spent a

moment blowing on his hands, then began quietly to frisk the room. Rushmere eyed him with hate, but didn't try to intervene. The big detective worked deftly. Finding a drawer filled with botanical specimens, he emptied it delicately, sheet by sheet. And the books, of which there were so many! Rapidly but gently they ruffled through his hands. The room that at first sight appeared so cluttered was soon, without fuss, being stripped to the bone.

'It won't get you anywhere!' Rushmere piped at last. 'All this harassment is mere persecution. There's nothing to find. And your stupid insinuations are without the smallest foundation in fact.'

'You won't reconsider that . . .?'

'No I won't! And you can't prove the things you allege. Because none of them are true. I know nothing of this man, or guns, or robberies, or any such nonsense.'

'So where were you at two-seventeen on Saturday?'

'What – when—?'

'At two-seventeen. When the police siren was sounding on the main road, and Sternfield was being shot in the Priory Wood?'

His mouth sagged, but he recovered quickly. 'I was here – out here – with Miss Stoven! We were watching the stork, she and I, and you can't prove anything else.'

'We can try.' Gently knocked out his pipe. 'Perhaps it's time we took a look at your car.'

'My car? What about my car?'

'We shall need it anyway for a laboratory check.'

He nodded to Aspall, who fetched a hand lamp, and they traipsed out into the freezing night. Rushmere's garage was a timber shed with double doors that scraped the ground. Inside, on bare earth, stood the Daf 33, a late model in Kobina white, its doors and boot secured.

'The keys.'

'Really, this is farcical!'

'All the same, hand them over.'

For a moment it seemed he wouldn't, then he jacked them out of a trouser pocket.

Gently unlocked the boot. For such a small car it was a compartment of unusual capacity – quite large enough for a man to curl up in with the lid closed over him. But now it was empty. The probing hand lamp revealed only rubber and painted metal. Empty and clean . . .! Forensic were going to need a bit of luck with this one.

'When did you wash that rubber mat?'

'I don't feel called on to remember.'

Gently flipped it up. Underneath, gleaming paint-work and the top of the tank. But then, behind the lip of the lid, the lamp revealed a fleck of yellow. Screwing his head under, Gently found himself staring at a pluck of fabric, snagged in a clip.

'What's this then?'

He disengaged it carefully and held it up for Rushmere to see. He heard the birdman's quick-taken breath: immediately he flashed the light on his face.

'How – how should I know?'

His hand had jerked up to hide his horror-stricken eyes.

'Of course you know! It's a bit of towelling. You'd know when you had a yellow towel in the boot.'

'But I don't—!'

'Listen to me! Sternfield was shot through the head. You'd have to bandage the

head with something to keep it from bleeding in the boot. And what would come handy? A towel! A towel from Miss Stoven's cottage. And with the body doubled up in the boot, the head would lie tight under the lid.' He dropped the lid with a loud clang. 'Just where that clip would snag the towel!'

'This . . . this is fantasy . . .!'

'You had to slam the lid!'

'I won't listen—!'

'Then how did this get there?'

Suddenly, he shoved the lamp at Aspall, grabbed the birdman's wrist and forced the hand from his horrified face.

'Answer the question!'

I . . . I . . .!'

'You know how that towelling got in your boot.'

Rushmere was shaking. He made a feeble effort to free his wrist from Gently's grasp.

'It's . . . it's from an old cleaning cloth . . .!'

'A *towel*?'

'Yes . . . I'd forgotten! It was some time ago . . .'

'You clean your boot with a towel?'

'Yes . . . an old one . . .'

Gently flung the wrist aside with disgust.

'It isn't from an old towel. This one was newish, looks as though it might have been freshly laundered – snatched from the airing cupboard at the cottage by someone who hadn't a moment to lose!'

'No – you're wrong!'

'So where is it now?'

'I put it out – burned it.'

'Yes – of course!'

'But it's true! You're making all this fuss about nothing . . .'

Gently snorted. But the moment had passed: Rushmere was pulling himself together. Now he was massaging his wrist aggrievedly and preparing to parry any fresh onslaught. The birdman was no pushover . . .! In the witness box, it would take a good counsel to get him going . . .

He stowed the pluck of towelling in an envelope and turned his attention to the rest of the car. The interior was less immaculate than the boot: there was mud on the mats that might have significance. But nothing else. Under the bonnet lay the flat-twin engine, devoid of mystery. There was mud on the inslanted sills, and a yellowish spatter . . . cow dung?

'Have you visited a farm lately . . .?'

Rushmere chose to be sulkily silent. And really, that was his best bet, as perhaps he was belatedly realizing!

When they'd finished with the garage he followed them stiffly to the garden shed, hands dug in his pockets, all his bearing one of defiance. Among the raffle in the shed was a stuffed plastic sack, which Aspall fell on and prodded eagerly. But all it contained was musty leaf mould: doubtless a perk of the wardening business.

Gently pointed to a spade on which clay was crusted.

'When did you last dig your garden?'

For a moment Rushmere held to his silence, then he snapped: 'When it suited me.'

‘And you have a clay soil?’

‘Why shouldn’t I?’

‘I would have thought the soil here was sandy.’

‘You can think what you like, can’t you?’

Gently nodded to Aspall. ‘Take the spade.’

But after that it was stalemate: Rushmere had finished with answering questions. Back in the parlour he sat rigid in a chair, his face turned sullenly from the policemen. And in his way, he too was Grimchurch, represented that same dogged polity – exposed now, harassed and buffeted: yet still presenting a bruised dignity . . .

‘We shall need your statement.’

He didn’t turn his head. ‘And suppose I refuse to give one?’

‘You can make it here or at the police station.’

In the end, it was Campsey who coaxed him to consent.

Aspall muttered, aside: ‘Aren’t we taking him in, sir?’

Gently shook his head. ‘We’ll let him stew. With a tail posted in the lane. Leaving him loose could save us time.’

‘He might pick up the money and bolt, sir.’

‘That’s what I mean by saving us time.’

Aspall rasped his chin dubiously but kept further objection to himself.

And so they left him sitting by his fire, which by now had burned low again. It was after two; a low mist had risen, but the moon was sailing clear of clouds.

‘What’s for tomorrow, sir?’ Aspall asked.

‘The same priority. We want the bodies.’

After a silence, Aspall said: ‘Bodies, sir?’

Some seconds later, Gently shrugged.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FISHERMAN DIDN'T normally take in guests, but they had provided him with the room of an absent daughter – a bright, colourful little apartment with folk-weave curtains and a candlewick bed-spread. On the dressing table the daughter smiled at him, a youthful version of her buxom mother, while from the window you had a view up the hill to the ruins of the Priory, pale in the moonlight.

He'd tumbled into bed dog-tired, not even bothering to knock out his pipe, to be wakened – it seemed – only minutes later by the landlady, with a tea tray.

'Good morning, Superintendent!'

'Uhuh.'

'It's a lovely day. Shall I pull your curtains?'

'Were there any messages?'

'Your man wants to see you. Would you like me to send him up?'

Struggling into consciousness, he could see through the window a low sun gilding frosted trees. And the landlady was still in her dressing gown, with her blonde hair parcelled in a net.

The Detective-Constable's name was Reydon. He came in carrying a pad of notes – a fair-haired youngster with a girlish mouth: you would scarcely put him at nineteen.

'We've got some results with the gun, sir!'

'Park your backside while I pour some tea.'

'Sir—?'

'And hand me that ashtray. What you've got can wait for two minutes.'

Reydon blushed like a scolded child and hastened to pass the ashtray. Then he sat embarrassedly on the low dressing chair while the latter gulped tea and put on his pipe.

'Now! What's shattering the world this morning?'

'Sir, the gun belongs to the girl.'

'To Miss Stoven?'

'Yes sir. It's registered in her name in Wimbledon.'

Was it then! Gently took a reflective pull of tea. And all this time . . . was it possible that he'd been on the wrong track, after all?

'Is there a valid licence?'

'It seems so, sir. She obtained it through a local gun club. Her father was the club secretary. Miss Stoven is still a paid-up member.'

'When was the licence issued?'

'In seventy-three, sir. She used to go shooting with her father. She packed it up when he died, but the gun is still registered in her name.'

'What else about it?'

‘They’ve matched the bullet, sir.’

‘Dabs?’

‘No sir. But the blood is human. They’ve queried Wimbledon about Sternfield’s blood group, but nothing has come through on that yet.’

Gently drew hard on his first pipe. This certainly gave things a different complexion! If Sternfield had used the gun in the hold-up, was it possible that he’d done so without the owner’s knowledge . . .? Because if not, Ka Stoven was in it with him, might even have instigated the affair. And then his coming to her wouldn’t have been fortuitous but part of a plan, due to happen anyway.

And yet . . . there were no letters later than February . . . and none from her at Sternfield’s flat.

Those from her he might have thought to destroy, but why would she destroy those from him . . .?

‘Any luck with the car?’

‘No sir.’ Reydon turned a leaf of the pad. ‘Boot, negative. Mud, a common sample. Cow dung in wheel arches and on sills.’

‘The bit of towelling?’

‘Clean, sir. A piece torn from an Osman hand towel.’

‘And the spade?’

‘They couldn’t identify the clay, sir. It’s being referred to the Agriculture laboratory.’

But the ownership of the gun . . .! Gently poured more tea and sipped it slowly, with absent eyes.

Reydon, his information exhausted, sat on uncomfortably, nursing the pad.

And the ownership of the gun was Aspall’s topic when he interrupted Gently’s breakfast – accompanied, today, by a second minibus, extra squad cars, and two more dogs.

After accepting a cup of coffee, he said decidedly: ‘She had to be in it from the start, sir!’

Gently grunted over his marmalade. ‘There could scarcely have been two guns.’

‘Not very likely, sir. And if he used her gun, he must have been out here to collect it.’

‘We found no letters . . .’

‘We wouldn’t do, sir. They’d have more sense than to keep those. And there’s always the blower. I reckon they had meetings, either up here or down there.’

Gently spooned on more marmalade. In fact, the evidence was all against it. Sternfield hadn’t been seen in the village, and people didn’t remember the Dryad taking trips. If they’d been professionals, now . . .! But they weren’t. The whole business had an amateur stamp. A half-cocked bank clerk having a brainstorm and, by luck, getting away with it . . .

‘What motive would she have?’

Aspall rocked his shoulders. ‘Why do chummies do these things? There’s a lot of it going on these days, sir. They think it’s a gas to pull off a job.’

‘The writer of those poems . . .?’

‘Why not, sir? If she isn’t a nutter she’s halfway there. And Rushmere’s another. I reckon Campsey was a hero when he took that gun off him.’

Gently chewed silently for some moments. ‘So what have you got laid on this

morning?'

'I'm extending the search, sir, to the heath and the foreshore, and the marshes north of the village.'

'What about the reserve?'

Aspall whistled through his teeth. 'The Chief Constable wouldn't hear a word about that, sir. But he's authorized the use of a chopper, flying not lower than a hundred feet.'

'A hundred feet!'

'He might spot something, sir. And it would be a swine of a place to search on foot.'

Gently drank coffee glumly. That reserve was the focus of the exercise! If Rushmere had a body or bodies to lose, wouldn't that be the first place he would make for? A hiding place guarded by man and nature . . . and he alone its keeper. The sea might treacherously give up its secrets, but not that forbidden mere and reed-swamp . . .

'We'll take a look round Rushmere's place by daylight.'

'Yes sir. I've sent Warren with a dog handler.'

'And I want patrols on the lookout for Miss Stoven's car – it may have been left somewhere in the neighbourhood.'

Aspall nodded silently.

'And lay a car on for me.'

He finished his coffee and rose. From outside they could hear the grumbling flutter of the chopper, making a low pass overhead.

Rushmere was about.

His gaunt, tall figure hovered by the doors of the empty garage, near where Warren and the handler were prowling about the unkempt garden.

Hearing Gently pull up, he turned to stare, his narrow face a blank. He was wearing the jacket with the green flashes and stout field boots. And his glasses.

Gently got out and strolled to a Panda that was parked near the gate. The driver, who'd been smoking, hastily stubbed his fag and climbed out too.

'Was there nothing to report last night . . .?'

'No sir. He didn't leave the premises.'

But he had just come to the door, about half an hour after they'd left. He'd stood staring into the darkness with the faint light of the lamp behind him. Then he'd turned and gone in quickly, closing the door with a bang.

'You think he spotted you?'

'Must have done, sir. Though I'm hanged if I know how he could've. Last night I was parked down the loke a bit, and the moon was in. He must have eyes like an owl.'

Down the garden Warren and his man were turning over a pile of rubbish. The dog, secured to an apple tree, was whimpering and prancing excitedly. Gently joined them, ignoring Rushmere. Warren paused in his labours.

'Reckon it's no go, sir,' he muttered. 'I thought it might be from chummie's attitude.'

'What did he say to you?'

'Asked if he could help, sir. Said his garden needed a bit of a turn over.' Warren pointed a grubby finger to his forehead. 'One of those, sir, if I ever met one.'

Gently glanced round the dishevelled plot, separated from the heath only by rusty wire. On one side it was bordered by the thicket of hawthorn, its dense tangle barely penetrable.

'When you've done here, take a look at that thicket. Then report back in.'

Warren gave the hawthorns a sour gaze before returning to the pile of rubbish.

Above them the chopper went clattering, its observer sitting with dangled legs. Leisuredly intent, it gave the impression of some huge, yellow, mechanical dragonfly. It scoured low across the heath and disappeared over a rise. Rushmere had come running round the garage to watch it.

'That . . . that is an *outrage!'*

Gently shrugged, eyeing the birdman. There was pallor in his weathered cheeks and puffiness beneath the eyes. Had he slept at all . . .?

'It could be avoided.'

'This is a sanctuary. You'll undo the work of twenty years!'

'We're looking for something.'

'What – what?'

'If we knew where it was we wouldn't need the chopper.'

Rushmere's face was suddenly ghastly. His mouth had fallen open. He shuddered, and his hands crept automatically towards the glasses.

'You're certain . . . aren't you?'

'Pretty certain.'

'Then in God's name get it over! Charge me, lock me up . . . but don't ruin all I've ever lived for.'

'So where have you hidden it?'

'Never mind that! Just arrest me and call it off.'

'We need the body. And the money.' Gently paused. 'And Miss Stoven.'

'She has nothing to do with it!'

'We want her.'

'No – no. You can't have her.'

'Look,' Gently said. 'Holding out won't help matters. You're never going to walk out of this one. If you tell us it will be all over, and then I can call off the chopper directly.'

'But you can't have Ka!'

'I must have her.'

He hugged the glasses. 'No . . . no!'

'Then the search goes on.'

'Oh please . . . have mercy.'

'If you change your mind just tell us.'

He turned his back on the haggard despair in the crumpled face of the birdman. Rushmere was sobbing. Gently kept on walking. He got in his car, turned, drove away.

One of the minibuses stood on the park that overlooked that precious reserve, and below a number of dark figures were slowly combing the beach and marram dunes. The chopper was still quartering the heath behind: from up here, one seemed to be looking down on it: it flickered lazily on methodical runs, rising over the birches, swooping down declivities.

But when it reached the reserve, what would it see . . . at a hundred feet, or ten?

In that wilderness of water, overlying ooze, compartmented with reed-swamp and islets of rush?

There were glasses in the car; Gently fetched them. But the maze of the swamp defeated inspection. No doubt paths existed, for him who knew them, leading from one shaky footing to another, but if so they were undetectable. And so far, forbidden . . .

What could the chopper see there, where a weighted body would sink in the ooze – where teams of frogmen might search for ever, and only wholesale dredging reveal the secret . . .?

'What's new, Chiefie?'

It was the reporter of yesterday, accompanied now by a photographer. And before the day was very much older the press would be swarming in the village . . .

'Who let you in here?'

'Well actually, Chiefie, we drove across this field . . .'

'The reserve is closed – and that means you.'

'Now Chiefie . . . look, have you seen the paper?'

He unfolded a morning edition and shoved it hopefully in front of Gently. It carried the artist's impression of Sternfield with the caption: Killing in Birdland. Also, below, a small stock shot of Gently, and a box captioned: Search for Girlfriend.

'We did you proud, Chiefie.'

'You can still clear out.'

'A little bird says you suss the warden.'

'Little birds say anything. Blow.'

'Now Chiefie! You'll let us take pics, won't you?'

To get rid of them he conceded photographs, one of himself and one of the searchers. Then they reluctantly piled into their car and drove off slowly down the track. To harry Rushmere . . .? More than likely, if the constable there gave them half a chance.

Aspall came toiling up from the beach, his large features in a scowl. He crossed to where Gently stood by the National Trust marker.

'Nothing yet?'

Aspall hunched. 'One of the lads has seen an avocet.'

'Better give him five points.'

Aspall growled and lit a fag. 'You know, I'm wondering . . . chummie isn't a fool. He'd know we'd soon get round to this place. Once he'd got the body loaded in his boot he could have dropped it at Land's End.'

'It would take a cool chummie to do that.'

Aspall sucked smoke. 'Maybe not Land's End. But the forest, that's not so far off. He could have gone that way as well as this.'

Yes . . . he could have. But would he, in those moments of coursing panic? Wouldn't he have turned, like a frightened animal, to the wilderness he knew . . .?

'We can't spare men to search in the forest. You'd better contact the ranger.'

'Yes sir.'

'And while you're at it, give him the description of Miss Stoven's car.'

Aspall hesitated. 'You're still thinking . . .'

'I want to cover all the angles.'

Aspall went to radio from his car. Below, the line of searchers was receding. Soon, they'd come to the southern boundary, soon the chopper would have ransacked

the heath. And then someone, somewhere, would have to take a decision about the water and the reed-swamp . . . about the avocets. Unless Rushmere buckled under the increasing pressure put on him.

Aspall returned.

'I'm putting men in those trees, sir.' He pointed to the birches fringing the heath. 'The marshes at the top end are flooded – not much point in going on there.'

'Has the chopper reported?'

'Yes sir. There's an old trench they think we should look into. Something the army dug during the war. It's full of lumber and rusty barbed wire.'

Gently grunted. 'That'll be fun! Somebody could finish without a leg.'

The radio in the car made sounds again and Aspall went to deal with it. Out to sea, some misty argosy was slowly pacing the horizon. A perfect day . . .! The sun was warm, and the auburn of the birches a tender flame. Gorses on the knoll were flowering, yellow pods between spikes of green.

Yet somewhere among it, dank and cold, lay that which would never feel sun again . . .

'Sir . . . here's something odd.'

Aspall came back with a troubled expression.

'We've had a report from the Department of Agriculture lab about the clay on that spade. Seems it's rather special – a clay they call Welbourne Earths. There's a vein that runs from Welbourne to the coast, but it only surfaces in one place.'

'Where's that?'

'Priory meadow.'

'Priory meadow . . .!'

'That's right, sir. But we were in there yesterday with a dog. If there was anything comic we must have spotted it.' Gently gazed at him. 'Isn't that where the bullocks are?'

'Yes sir, but . . .'

'There was dung on his car.'

'But we did turn it over, sir—'

'And the place is right – where one might have expected Rushmere to bury a body!'

Aspall stared at his senior in dismay. 'Sir, if it was there we'd certainly have found it.'

'It was there but you didn't find it. Assemble the men – and call off that chopper!'

Aspall hesitated, his mouth open; then he swallowed and turned to his car.

The chopper showed briefly over slopes by the reed-swamp.

With luck, that would be its last run.

If anything too many men were crowding into that not-so-large meadow, in a corner of which the bullocks had collected, their dripping snouts turned towards the dogs.

At most it was a couple of acres, squeezed between the road and the cliff edge; flanked, on one side by the Priory wood, and on the other by a plantation.

A few yards from the road stood the ruin's west front, its stone-framed window and empty doorways; next, shapeless stones, the remnants of pillars; then tumps of masonry that might have been anything. A wall of rough flint, nested in brambles, enclosed the meadow on two sides, while at the bottom a wire fence divided it from the brambly cliff edge.

Not so large . . .! Almost at a glance you could take in the whole scene – stones, boundaries, close-cropped grass, and rashes of mud, trodden by the bullocks.

'We'll need extra men on the road, sir . . .'

Suddenly, Grimchurch seemed to have woken up. People were hurrying along from the village to bunch at the gateway, the only viewpoint. And the narrow road was already obstructed by the two minibuses and the cars. Campsey, solid and familiar, was having little success at moving the curious.

'Two men to assist Campsey . . .'

Gently had taken a turn round the ruins. Now he stood watching the line of men who were probing their way down the meadow with rods. Others were beating along the brambled walls, and two cautiously searching the cliff edge. The dog handlers, rather at fault, stood together with their charges, comparing notes.

'Sir . . . the reporters would like a word.'

From the corner of his eye Gently had seen them. Half a dozen now, with as many cameramen, all jostling with the gapers for a view. The hunt was up . . .

'There'll be a statement later. Get some screens for that gateway.'

Not that that would baffle the reporters, who probably already were casing the plantation.

Then there was the farmer, a moon-faced man wearing leather-faced breeches and a sweat-stained hat.

'I want to shift those bullock, boy!'

His request refused, he took his stand by the bullocks, to herd them as required.

A complete circus . . . but as yet, no body!

And it was, indeed, a modest size in meadows . . .

Gently chewed on his pipe stem. The logic was inexorable: here, and here only, one found that clay. Unless the M of A boffins had got it wrong, there was no other place where the spade could have collected it. And yet . . . the line of probers had nearly reached the fence, and those searching the brambles had begun to beat about despondently; while the dogs, perhaps confused by the bullocks, had offered no contribution at all.

Was there some mistake . . . or had the birdman used a cunning that was defeating the normal process of search?

He stared round the scene for the hundredth time. Somewhere, some feature must be deluding them . . . some element that was too obvious, had been taken for granted, wasn't being seen . . .

And at once he did see it – the fodder-rack! On its four iron wheels it was standing there rakishly, the ground about it trampled to mud and strewn with straw, kale leaves and droppings. The probers had worked around it with caution, the dogs hadn't given it a second look . . .

Gently crossed to the farmer.

'When was the rack last moved?'

The farmer gazed at it blankly. 'I reckon it's due for a move now, old partner!'

'But when was the last time?'

'Don't ask me. I daresay it's stood there since the spring.'

'Let's move it, shall we?'

'If you say so. It's time it went on fresh ground.'

Together they rolled the rack aside. The spot beneath it was deep in rubbish. With his stick the farmer swept it clear; to reveal naked earth, embossed with slap marks.

‘Bring some screens and the spades.’

Nobody could accuse Gently of showing emotion! Empty-faced, he stood by the spot for which they’d been searching for two days.

From all parts of the meadow the seekers had come scurrying, triggering a buzz of excitement in the road. Then there’d been a crash and a faint cry from the plantation, where an over-eager reporter had tumbled out of a tree . . .

‘Photographs first.’

Aspall, his eyes big, hastened to rap out excited orders. Too plainly the local man had begun to give up hope, when now, suddenly . . . He grabbed Gently’s arm.

‘Sir – this does for Rushmere!’

Gently grunted. ‘Wait till we see what we’ve got.’

‘But there’s the clay, sir – mixed with the soil!’

‘So be sure you take a sample for analysis.’

The screens arrived, rolls of hessian looking vaguely like stretchers. Warren, loud with authority, directed where to hammer in the stakes. Meanwhile the photographer had taken his shots and the spades had arrived in a canvas bag. Brand new out of store, their blades were still dulled with grease.

‘Gough . . . Hinton.’

They began to dig, Gough with the steady strokes of a gardener. Hinton, a younger man, took spadefuls that quickly brought him out in a sweat.

And now there was silence all about, the men standing in watchful groups: just the shuck and thump of digging. Even in the road they’d fallen silent.

‘Something here, sir . . .’

‘Take it easy!’

Discipline failed, and men pushed forward. Black and shiny, a shapeless something was being uncovered by the spades.

Aspall hissed through his teeth. ‘It’s another of those sacks, sir, like the one we saw in chummie’s shed . . .’

‘Stop using the spades!’

Working now with their hands, the two men burrowed on round the object they’d found.

‘Right . . . photographs, then raise it.’

The glinting package was hoisted up. From their expressions it was clear that Gough and Hinton had no doubt about what they were handling. The mouth of the sack was secured with twine; Warren knelt to saw through it. Then, distastefully but firmly, he peeled back the plastic.

‘Sternfield, sir . . .’

The face that projected was waxy grey and open-eyed. The mouth was agape, and round the head, like a turban, was knotted a yellow towel. Gently stooped. The selvedge of the towel had stitched to it an Osman label, with beside it, in sprawled capitals, the laundry mark: Stoven.

‘Cover.’

Warren drew up the sack; someone handed him a spare panel of hessian. Still there was silence among the men, most of whom stood with drooped heads. But then a distraction occurred: Campsey came running from the gate. He pushed through the knot of men to halt panting before Gently.

‘Sir . . . I’ve just had a message from the Panda at Rushmere’s. It seems like Rushmere’s done a bunk.’

‘A bunk . . .! Where?’

‘Across the heath, sir, and he may have been gone for more than an hour. The constable got into a barney with one of the reporters, and he reckons that Rushmere could have slipped off then.’

It was a moment worth savouring. They’d found their body, and lost their man.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'PATROLS ON ALL roads surrounding the area. The rest to make a sweep across the heath.'

But a glance at the map that Aspall hastily unfolded showed just how thoroughly they might have lost him. In an hour he could have got four miles and reached one of several minor roads flanking the heath – caught a lift west, south or north, and perhaps now be heading for some safe hideout.

Or, almost as bad, he could have reached the forest, which he probably knew as well as the rangers . . . while somewhere there was Miss Stoven's car, whether the owner was quick or dead.

And worse was to follow.

'Sir, he may have a gun . . .'

Someone had thought to check on his licence! The gun he'd waved at them had been impounded, but now, it appeared, he had another . . .

Aspall was red-faced.

'My slip-up, sir. I reckon that pistol put it out of my head.'

'We ought to have found the second gun.'

'I don't understand . . . he must have hidden it under the floorboards.'

Gently hunched. Whatever the way of it, now they faced the prospect of an armed man. And this time, when they looked down the barrel, they couldn't rely on an empty breech . . .

'See that everyone's briefed.'

'Yes sir. Can I call back the chopper?'

'Tell them to cover the roads and outskirts. We can cover the heath with men and dogs.'

But really, this was Aspall's job now. The crime was confirmed, the culprit detected. Gently stood by while the local man gave orders and made his dispositions. The meadow, lately so crowded, was rapidly emptying, and the vehicles pulling away. Two men remained posted at the graveside, another at the gate.

Outside, the bystanders were confused by this sudden rush of departures. Some were following after the cars, others standing about indecisively. But the reporters were happy: they'd nobbled the farmer, an indisputable eyewitness to the discovery. They had hustled him away, only mildly protesting, to the hospitable influence of The Fisherman . . .

'Shall we go, sir?'

Aspall was on pins, fretting to get after his man.

'You carry on . . . I'll follow. I want a word with the pathologist.'

Aspall checked for a moment, doubtingly, then jumped in his car. Five minutes later the ambulance drew up and the pathologist climbed out, with his bag.

‘What do you want me to say?’

He was an elderly man with a pale, pouchy face. Watched with interest by the two ambulance crewmen, he untied the damp yellow towel. The small entry wound was inconspicuous, having been scavenged of blood by the towel. The exit wound was more messy: fragments of bone had stuck to the cloth.

‘Is that powder-tattooing?’

‘Probably. I can tell you for certain later.’

‘If it is, how close was the gun?’

‘Not more than six inches away.’

‘Do powder tests on the hands, will you?’

The pathologist stared at him, then nodded.

They strapped the body to a stretcher and carted it out to their vehicle. Cameras clicked, and a couple of breathless reporters raced up the hill again.

‘Chiefie, a statement!’

‘Later.’

‘That’s Sternfield’s body, isn’t it?’

‘I said later.’

He got in his car and reached to slam the door. Then he noticed, among the spectators, the clumsy figure of Dick Middleton: on an impulse he beckoned to him.

‘Jump in . . .!’

Dick Middleton did. They drove away.

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘I may need your brains. You’re familiar with the reserve, aren’t you?’

‘I suppose so.’

He’d come armed with his camera which, however, was still buttoned in its case. His fresh young face had a stubborn look and his eyes stared hard ahead. Soon, now, he’d be growing a beard and cultivating the appearance of a regular backwoods-man . . .

‘That . . . was the fellow?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And you think that Phil . . .?’ he let it trail.

‘Let’s say I know he disposed of the body.’

‘What exactly does that mean?’

‘Have you heard from Ka Stoven?’

Silence! His lips had tightened, his brows set in their attractive frown. They drove past the track to Rushmere’s cottage, in the entry of which were parked the minibuses.

‘Look . . . you *must* have got it wrong!’

‘Because you think you know your friends too well?’

‘Yes – I do! I know that Phil has had a breakdown, but he’s a man who wouldn’t hurt a fly. And Ka . . .’

‘Ka is a poet.’

‘She’s just too sane to do something like this.’

‘Yet someone shot him.’

‘It could have been *me*.’

‘But it wasn’t, was it?’

Dick Middleton stuck his chin out.

A constable was posted at the gate to the reserve and he threw a salute before opening to them. They bumbled slowly over ramps installed to control the speed of visiting cars.

Far off, over trees, the flickering chopper had resumed its droop-nosed runs, but Campsey's Panda was the only vehicle parked on the high knoll. Gently parked by it. He got out to join Campsey.

'Anything doing?'

'No sir. All I've seen is the birds.'

'How many men were put in at this end?'

'Six, sir. They're spread out along the stream.'

'What about down there?'

'I'm watching that, sir. You get a good view from up here. Then we've got men working up from Shoreswell, in case he's gone along the dunes.'

'That still leaves gaps.'

'Yes sir. But to cover this lot you'd need the military.'

Gently shrugged – true enough! And for all they knew he was long gone. If he'd considered it coolly he'd have headed for a road and the first car to stop for him. Yet would he have considered it coolly, Rushmere . . .? He'd been in a different state of mind when Gently had left him! Then he'd been strung up, in despair, ready for any rash action . . . in his warden's jacket, with glasses slung: the protector of birds, of a sacred country! If you read it aright, where else would he be except out there . . . in his kingdom?

Gently beckoned to Dick Middleton.

'Listen carefully. Your friend is in a bad mess. He gave us the slip a while back and he may be around here, armed with a gun. He's going to be charged in any case, but there could be mitigating circumstances. But if he's stupid enough to take a pot at a policeman then he'll get life, and that means life. I don't want it to happen, so if you know where he might be hiding, you'd better tell us.'

Dick Middleton's eyes were large. 'But there's only the two hides.'

'Have you been into the reserve?'

'Yes – it's simply islands and reed-beds.'

'The reeds could hide a man.'

'You don't understand! They grow out of water, there's nothing solid.'

'A boat . . . a punt?'

He shook his head. 'You couldn't shove it in far enough to hide it.'

And that was plain from their elevated viewpoint, with the reed-swamp below like a fawn forest. Regular and unbroken, its six-foot stems presented a stout front to the open water. But where else . . .? Could the foolish birdman really be cowering in one of the hides, the first place that a policeman searching the area would look?

Gently let his eyes roam further over the baffling sweep of the reserve, the pools, islands, beards of reed, the still-green colonies of rush. And beyond it, the copper birchwood and low slope of the fields, and . . . his eye returned to it . . . the black tower of the abandoned mill.

'The mill! What do you know about that?'

They both stared at him in surprise.

'Reckon that'll be boarded up, sir,' Campsey said. 'They're dangerous places, those old mills.'

'But what's behind it – round about?'

‘Well, nothing but marsh and water, sir. It was for drainage. The only way to it is along the causeway from the sluice.’

Gently trained glasses on the mill. The capless tower stood stark in the sunlight, a massive cog-wheel projecting from its crown, a glint of water at its foot. Three notches of darker shadow were windows, frameless and empty, while a semicircular timber casing, slung at the side, doubtless housed the great paddle-wheel. A place to hide out . . .? Defenceless to rain, and with wind howling through the gaping windows . . .? About to lower the glasses, he paused: something had flashed out there, in the mill! Something . . . he glanced at the sun, now standing southwards, over the power station. A flash of glass . . . glasses! The watchers on the knoll were themselves being watched!

And, for confirmation, at that precise moment, a heron rose from below the mill with slow, heavy flaps . . .

‘Can we get a car out there?’

Campsey looked doubtful. ‘We can get one as far as the sluice, sir.’

‘That’ll be close enough. Come on!’

The three of them piled into Campsey’s Panda.

It was a rough ride to the sluice, beginning with a slither down the sandy track. Under the wall of the reserve the going got firmer, but here and there was obstructed by old defence works. Campsey, stolid and silent, kept the Panda bouncing and swerving.

‘He was going to take me over the mill . . .’ Dick Middleton muttered.

‘You might have remembered that before!’

The young man put on his sullen look. ‘As a matter of fact, he’s got some keys . . .’

They skewed to a stop by concrete blocks a few yards short of the sluice. All was peaceful. Mallards bobbed in the drain and, higher up, the grebes watched them.

‘Along here, sir . . .’

A low, rush-edged bank divided the mere from the marshes southwards, bordered on one side by the drain, on the other by reed and scrub willow. A path followed it, burrowing past the reeds. The top of the mill showed over the reed plumes.

‘You lead. Try to keep cover.’

They climbed the rails and set off. The mallard, helpfully, found a gap to swim through, while the grebes dived and failed to reappear. Had Rushmere noticed the Panda dip down from the car park . . .? For the rest, the wall of the reserve would have hidden it. And here the cover was complete: the path hugged the reeds and had them ducking under the willow.

Ahead, Campsey halted.

‘I don’t know, sir . . . this path doesn’t seem to have been used lately.’

He had come to a rash of naked black peat, innocent of marks except the stipple of rain.

‘He must have come in another way.’

‘It’s all wet swamp, sir. There isn’t any way but this.’

‘Rushmere might know one.’

Dick Middleton said gruffly: ‘Phil gets around the marsh like a coypu.’

Gently shrugged – if it came to a siege, the birdman had chosen his spot well! You couldn’t outflank him, couldn’t storm him, and by night he could silently steal away . . .

‘Just keep your heads down. And Middleton, stay back. I’ve brought you to talk to him – if we have to.’

Patiently, Campsey crept forward, easing aside the reeds and twigs. Now they were catching glimpses of the flaking black tower and the slanted cog-wheel sprouting from it. Was Rushmere on watch? If so, the odds were that he was scanning the slopes of the heath, where perhaps now the line of searchers had appeared, while the chopper came and went overhead. The path below he wouldn’t be watching . . . which offered a chance to slink across to the door! And then a stealthy ascent of the ladder . . . with luck, his gun would be stood down somewhere . . .

But a moment later such hopes were vain: and the birds it was that betrayed them. With a whirr and a rush that sounded shattering, a flock of tufties took to the wing. A splendid sight – the air was full of straining bodies and labouring wings – but they might as well have been a visiting card to the fugitive in the mill.

‘Come out, come out!’ his voice floated down to them.

Gently elbowed past Campsey.

‘Get on your transceiver – stay in cover, and that goes for Middleton too.’

‘But you said I was to talk to him!’ Dick Middleton protested.

‘First, we’ll see if he’s nervous with a trigger.’

Gently pushed through a screen of willow, cleared the reeds, and came out on open ground before the mill.

Rushmere had the gun, but he wasn’t pointing it. Instead, he was holding it across his body. He was standing in the empty rectangle of the first-storey window, below which was the small but stout door. His face was very pale and his eyes were staring and he was clutching the gun low down.

‘That’s – that’s close enough!’

Gently halted. Campsey had been right about the terrain. The mill had been built on an island of firm ground in the middle of swamp: acre upon acre of it.

‘What is it you want?’

‘I think you know that. Why are you fooling with that gun?’

‘Don’t come any closer!’

‘Why? You wouldn’t shoot me.’

‘One more step – and I’ll shoot myself!’

Gently froze. The muzzle of the gun was wavering beneath the birdman’s chin, his arms were straight down, his hands invisible behind the brickwork. Yes . . . he meant it! The staring eyes were fixed unwinkingly on Gently. Any moment . . . by pure accident . . .! Rushmere’s life was hanging by a thread.

‘They were tufted ducks, weren’t they . . .?’

‘You won’t take me!’

‘Never mind about that. Where did they go?’

‘If you try any tricks—’

‘Look, you’ve got your glasses. Do take a look round and see if you can spot them.’

The muzzle dithered, but remained vertical. Then the staring eyes blinked. The muzzle slid a little. One could hear the birdman’s breathing, checked and irregular.

‘I’ll bet you’ve got a good view up there . . . You can see all the reserve, can’t you?’

‘It’s no use your trying—’

‘The ducks went that way. See if you can spot them in one of the pools.’

‘Stop pretending I’m an idiot!’

‘Look, if I had your glasses

‘Stop it, I tell you – or I’ll shoot!’

‘But if you’d lend them to me, just for a jiffy—’

‘Stop – stop. I shan’t tell you again!’

The muzzle whipped back tight under his chin and his eyes gazed straight ahead. His breathing had quickened: the sidelong sun showed a gleam of sweat on his forehead.

‘All right . . . that’s how you want it.’

He could have sworn he heard a pressure taken!

‘But at least, think of our point of view too. You might as well tell us a few things first. For instance, where’s the Dryad?’

Was he shoving him too hard? The rigid figure of the birdman swayed. From moment to moment, one expected to see that pallid face disintegrate . . .

‘I mean, what’ve you to lose . . .?’

‘She had nothing to do with it!’

‘Oh yes she had! You know that.’

‘I tell you no! It was I who shot him, I who buried the body up there . . .’

‘So where’s the money?’

‘I . . . it’s hidden . . .’

‘Where?’

‘Never mind . . . you’ll find it!’

‘Is it in the mill?’

He swayed again, then stiffened, with the gun jabbed firmly.

‘What’s in the mill . . . what are you hiding?’

‘Stop it now – just stop it!’

‘All right, all right!’

Gently shrugged exaggeratedly, turned and walked deliberately back to Campsey.

The village constable met him with anxious eyes.

‘Sir, I reckon he aims to do it . . .’

‘What’s been happening?’

Campsey gulped. ‘Inspector Aspall is on his way over.’

‘Warn him not to bring a mob out here.’

‘Yes sir . . . but shouldn’t I have a go at Rushmere?’

‘Middleton first.’ Gently grabbed the young man. ‘Say anything you like, but keep talking.’

‘But what – what?’ Dick Middleton stammered.

‘Just get out there and talk!’

Dick Middleton went fearfully forward. The gun was still resting under Rushmere’s chin. Absurdly, the birdman suggested a soldier who’d got in a tangle when presenting arms.

‘Phil . . .?’

‘Dick – go away!’

‘Phil . . . oh God! You don’t mean this, do you?’

‘Go away Dick! This is the last time.’

‘No Phil – oh no!’

He came back at a run.

'I can't do it – he'll shoot himself!' He clutched his head in shaking hands. 'Oh God, I'm a coward! I can't do it . . . I can't watch Phil . . . oh God.'

'Better let me have a go, sir,' Campsey said urgently. 'I'm maybe the one who'll get him to listen.'

'Give me your set, then.'

Campsey handed it over, then strode slowly out before the mill.

'Mr Rushmere, sir . . . can you hear me?'

If Rushmere could, he gave no sign.

'Mr Rushmere, now you know you shouldn't be trespassing in the mill . . .'

It was the proper note, no doubt, and the stolid Campsey was using it to perfection, but . . . In his window above the grey-faced birdman didn't stir.

'Mr Rushmere, sir, that mill is dangerous. We don't like people climbing about it. You could break a leg in there, sir, or some of the old machinery could fall on you. I reckon you'd better come down, sir. We'll have to board the old place up. Only watch yourself coming down the ladder, because I daresay you'll find a rung or two missing . . .'

Was he listening? It scarcely mattered. The drone of Campsey's voice was holding him. Each second that passed was a second gained, was pushing further off the destructive impulse. Only talk long enough, talk acceptably, and perhaps at last they wouldn't jump . . .

The radio gritted: Aspall spoke.

'Sir . . . we've found Miss Stoven's car.'

'Where?'

'Up here at the sluice, sir. It's parked alongside the Panda.'

The devil it was! 'So where is she?'

'Reckon she's heading your way, sir.'

'Then follow her!'

'Yes sir. Sorry we let her get through.'

Gently jammed the set in his pocket. This was the last thing he needed! Only let Rushmere get a glimpse of the girl and who knew which way he'd go . . .

'You – Middleton!'

The young man gaped at him.

'Get down the path and stop anyone passing.'

'No – I'm staying – I must stay!'

'Do as I say – get down the path!'

It was too late. There was a pad of feet and the brush of a body through scrub and reeds. A panting girl threw herself at Gently, her eyes alight with manic fury.

'Ka – oh Ka!' Dick Middleton cried.

'You fiends!' she exploded. 'What have you done to him?'

Gently grabbed her and forced her back into the willows. Luckily Campsey's voice hadn't faltered. The girl herself was gasping for breath but her flashing eyes signalled fresh outbursts.

'If you want him to live . . . keep it down!'

'I won't!'

'You will. He's got a gun. He has his finger on the trigger. One peep out of you, and he'll blow his head off.'

‘I don’t believe it!’

‘Shut up and listen.’

‘. . . Mr Rushmere, sir,’ came Campsey’s voice. ‘Don’t worry about me, sir, I shan’t interfere. You can ease off now with that gun . . .’

Her eyes crucified him. ‘You devil. It’s you who’s responsible for this. You must have known that he’s a nervous wreck – that his criminal wife left him for dead.’

‘I know also that he’s killed a man.’

‘That’s a lie.’

‘He admitted it just now.’

‘Then he’s lying too – you’ve driven him to it! My God, but someone’s going to pay.’

‘If Rushmere didn’t kill Sternfield, who did?’

‘Who? You did! The police killed him.’

‘The police . . .!’

‘Yes – with their bloody siren. He thought we’d shopped him, and shot himself.’

Gently gazed at her. ‘Do you think we’ll swallow that?’

‘You’ll have to swallow it, because it’s true.’

‘Then where’s the money?’

‘It’s at Liverpool Street Station – and the ticket’s in the post to Scotland Yard.’

The sudden quirk in her eye should have warned him, but astonishment made him slow. Before he could smother her she was screaming hysterically:

‘Phil – I’m here! Don’t do it! Phil!’

And the gun exploded.

‘Hold her!’ Gently bawled, thrusting Miss Stoven at the pop-eyed Dick Middleton.

Across at the mill, Campsey’s boot was crashing repeatedly into the locked door. It gave. They rushed in and up a worm-eaten ladder white with bird-droppings. Rushmere was lying in a pool of blood by the great iron-bound drive-shaft, the gun beside him.

But he’d bungled it. All he’d done was to excoriate his right shoulder.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE AMBULANCE COULDN'T get closer than the car park, so the chopper was called in to make an airlift. Patched up first by Campsey, then by a St John's man, Rushmere was conscious, but not talking. He'd lost plenty of blood. His beaked face was colourless, the eyes hooded to the merest slits.

'Sir, the girl is asking to go with him . . .'

Aspall had arrived soon after the shot. He'd found Miss Stoven in the arms of Dick Middleton, who'd hung on to her in spite of some desperate scratches. Then she had calmed down, hearing Rushmere was alive, had stood by angry faced, brooding retributions.

'Better let her, then.'

'But . . . sir!'

Gently drew Aspall aside.

'She's claiming that Sternfield shot himself. I want the results of the tests before I talk to her.'

Aspall's mouth dropped. 'Is that possible . . .?'

'Quite. There were signs of tattooing. I thought he might have been shot in a struggle, but he could equally well have done it himself.'

'Then there'll be no charge . . .?'

'Just for harbouring and concealing. And she can plead the harbouring was done under duress.'

Aspall, looking bemused, went to give orders. Miss Stoven was winched up after Rushmere. Then the chopper slanted away over the marshes, leaving behind it a gracious silence.

'The reporters are down at the sluice, sir . . .'

Also, it seemed, one half of Grimchurch! Gently kept Dick Middleton close beside him and hustled him quickly into a car. But a statement there'd have to be now . . .

'Chiefie, we've *got* to catch the evenings!'

'Listen then . . .'

They crowded round hungrily, with notebooks shoved almost into his chest.

'The warden, Rushmere, has been injured by the discharge of a shotgun. He has been airlifted to Eastwich and General Hospital. The injury is not fatal.'

'But Chiefie, who shot him?'

'No other person is involved.'

'Is he under arrest?'

'Rushmere is assisting us.'

'Do you expect to make a charge?'

Gently's face was quite blank. 'We are in a position to make charges of a minor character.'

‘Aw . . . Chiefie!’

He jumped into the car with their dismay still buzzing about his ears, and the driver scattered them by backing smartly, his wheels jetting sand.

Dick Middleton was goggling at Gently.

‘Is that true, sir . . . about the charges?’

Gently grunted. ‘Don’t count any chickens – and keep away from reporters!’

‘But sir, you did say . . .’

‘I said nothing, and if you’ve any sense you’ll say the same.’

At The Fisherman’s Rest he called for a drink before settling down with the phone. He dialled the Yard and his office extension: almost at once he got Dutt.

‘Nothing new from Wimbledon, Chief . . .’

‘What I’m interested in is bank notes!’

And it was a fact. That morning they’d collected thirty thousand pounds from Liverpool Street Station.

When Miss Stoven was fetched back from Eastwich, Gently had leisure to check his impressions. Belying the photograph, her eyes were hazel, and her hair, though dark, had gleams of red. But it was styled in the same helmet, and the face it enclosed was just as pugnacious. Of medium height, she had a sturdy figure, suggesting formidable prowess at tennis.

‘Sit down, Miss Stoven.’

‘First, I want to say something.’

She’d come into the incident room attended by a policewoman. It was late afternoon, with another frost pending; the fire was burning clear in the iron grate.

‘If Philip dies, I intend to sue you.’

Her stance as she stood before Gently was aggressive. Also seated in the room were Aspall and a second policewoman, a shorthand writer.

‘You hold us responsible?’

‘Yes, I do! Philip has told me how you bullied him. Quite obviously you were trying to break him down, to make him confess to what he didn’t do.’

‘And you yourself are in no way to blame . . .’

‘I to blame!’ Her indignation was handsome.

‘Please sit down, Miss Stoven.’

Her eyes flamed at him, then she dropped on the chair placed for her. Gently regarded her mildly.

‘Now . . . about your innocence! I’ve been reading Sternfield’s letters.’

‘My God, is nothing—!’ She almost choked. ‘But I could’ve expected it, couldn’t I?’

‘Sternfield wasn’t too intelligent, I’d say.’

‘I don’t want to hear your ideas about Eric!’

‘He was easily led. And you did the leading.’

‘That’s a filthy insinuation to make.’

‘But it’s true . . .’

She glared at him bitterly, her expressive mouth hooped. Her nose was ever-so-slightly snubbed, giving her face a peculiar piquancy.

‘Very well, then. But you don’t understand. Eric wasn’t the same as other people. He’d never had a family to belong to. He always felt himself an outsider.’

‘So you took pity on him.’

‘Yes – why not? At least I could understand his problem. Eric was imaginative. He created a fantasy world, and I didn’t mind being one of the actors. It was a game, that’s all. That’s what his letters were about.’

‘You were his goddess.’

‘Never mind that!’

‘I don’t think it was quite such a game to Eric. I think it was more like a reality. A reality that one day he’d try to make happen.’

Ka Stoven twisted angrily.

‘Isn’t that the crux of it?’

‘When it got too serious, I choked him off.’

‘But by then the damage was done. And the game you played with Sternfield led eventually to his death and to what happened today.’

‘But I couldn’t know that!’

‘Still . . . who’s to blame?’

She shook her head fiercely. ‘You’re just distorting it. I was good to Eric, good for him. You said yourself that he wasn’t too intelligent.’

Gently nodded. ‘Not too intelligent. A young man who lived in a world of fantasy. Who was driven by a compulsion to make it come true. Why did you give that young man your gun?’

‘I didn’t. He stole it.’

Her eyes were brilliant, and she’d jerked up straight in her chair. For a moment, the policewoman’s pencil had ceased to travel: now it started off again.

‘That’s not very likely.’

‘But he did! One day I missed it from a drawer at the flat. And Eric had always been fascinated by the gun. He denied it, of course, but I knew he’d taken it.’

‘When was this?’

‘Oh, months ago. While I was still living in Wimbledon. And it couldn’t have been anyone else, because no one else had been to the flat.’

Gently leaned back, his eyes narrowed. ‘And of course, you reported the theft to the police?’

‘How could I, without giving Eric away? And anyway, he might have brought it back.’

‘It didn’t occur to you that he might use it.’

‘No. To Eric the gun was a symbol. Somehow it made him feel tranquil, more integrated. It gave him the feel of my sort of world.’

‘And that’s what he wanted.’

‘Yes – of course. He was envious of my background. Of my having a father who went shooting, and took me with him. Eric wanted to share it.’

‘The gun was a key . . .’

‘If you like.’

‘And you thought he wouldn’t use it?’

She stared sulkily for a moment, then dashed her hair back with disdain.

‘All right, I was stupid about Eric – not the doctor of souls I was picturing myself! Perhaps you’ve been stupid at times too, like when you put the pressure on Phil. But that’s all I was, stupid, thinking I knew how Eric worked. When he turned up at the cottage on Thursday I was never more taken aback in my life.’

Gently’s nod was reluctant. ‘What did he want from you?’

‘I’m not sure he knew that himself. It must just have begun to dawn on him what an impossible position he was in. He was babbling at one moment about bribing the fishermen to take him across to Holland, at another about marrying me and going off to live in Skye. But in the end he was on his knees, just begging me to let him stay at the cottage.’

‘Of course . . . he had the gun.’

‘Oh, he didn’t threaten me.’

Gently steepled his fingers. ‘He had the gun! What he meant to do with it neither you nor I can be certain.’

She looked surprised, then somewhat scornful. ‘If you’re trying to help me, thanks very much. But I prefer to tell the truth, and I hope your stenographer is getting it down.’

Gently sighed. ‘. . . wasn’t outwardly threatening. Perhaps we can let it go at that!’

The shorthand writer scored a line, then hastily inserted fresh text.

‘So what did you decide?’

Miss Stoven shrugged. ‘Nothing. I mean, what was there to decide? Poor Eric’s plans were quite crazy, he simply wasn’t the sort to be on the run. It was a question of him facing up to what he’d done, only he wasn’t ready for that, then. So I just calmed him down, fed him, stuffed him with aspirin, and put him to bed.’

‘Very commendable.’

‘It was human, at least.’

‘Why didn’t you then ring the police?’

Her eyes were large. ‘What good would that have done? I told you that Eric wasn’t ready for it.’

‘But that’s scarcely the point!’

‘I think it is. For him to make the decision was of critical importance. It was the solitary positive act left to him, and to have prevented it would have been criminal.’

‘All right, all right!’ Gently waved dismissingly. ‘But I take it that Sternfield wasn’t seeing it your way.’

‘No.’

‘And so you brought in Rushmere.’

‘Phil is a man who can understand.’

Some coals fell from the grate, and Aspall rose to deal with them. Miss Stoven sat broodingly, head tilted, her hair swung forward beside her face. There were lights in Purlins across the road, but the curious of Grimchurch had gone home. On the other hand one heard occasional murmurs from the saloon, where the reporters had collected.

‘When did you tell Mr Rushmere about Sternfield?’

‘I told Phil the next morning. He was very concerned. Apparently I could get into trouble simply by having Eric there. I suppose that’s true?’

‘Quite true.’

She tossed her hair. ‘Yes – it would be! But I could scarcely throw him out in the emotional state that he was in. Phil wanted to talk to him, but I wouldn’t let him. I thought it would only alarm Eric further. But then in the evening Dick came round, and he must have caught sight of Eric through the window.’

‘You realized that.’

She nodded scornfully. ‘You may have noticed that Dick isn’t much of an actor.

And later on, Lionel rang me with a very suspicious invitation. So we were in trouble. Dick is jealous about me, I knew he wouldn't let it drop. Somehow we had to make Eric see sense before Dick came prowling round again.'

'By offering to surrender himself.'

'Exactly.' She gave her hair a brisk touch.

'So then . . . did Rushmere see him?'

'First I had to prepare Eric. That wasn't easy. He was in such a funk that he would scarcely leave the bedroom. He just wanted to hide, like an animal, pulling the bedclothes over his head. I felt I wanted to slap him, give him a shake – get the spunk back in him somehow.' She stared fiercely. 'Well, I talked him into it, then I went to fetch Phil. When we got back, Eric was sitting in the parlour, all on a tremble. He had the gun.'

'The time?'

'It was nearly lunchtime. Say a quarter-past twelve.'

'Was he pointing the gun?'

'Not really. He was just fiddling with it.'

'Go on.'

She stirred slightly. 'Phil . . . he's a very spiritual person. He's been through it all himself, he knew better than I did how Eric was feeling. He talked to him beautifully, sensitively, and Eric began to listen. I'm sure that Phil could have got him through it if he'd only had more time. I kept quiet. What bothered me was that I knew we could soon expect Dick. He'd think I was out and come snooping round, and then if Eric spotted him he'd blow up again. It was all too late . . . I should have let Phil come on Friday, as he'd wanted.'

'Did you see Middleton?'

'Not then.'

'How long was Rushmere talking to Sternfield?'

'Most of two hours.' She leaned forward, her eyes intense and large. 'Phil had begun to put it to him that the only way out was acceptance. That if he ran he'd be running from himself, and then he'd never be free. And Eric was responding, I'll swear it, he was beginning to come round. His hands weren't twitching so much, his eyes were steady, fixed on Phil's. A little more time . . . that's all it needed! Perhaps no more than another hour. Eric wasn't a criminal and wouldn't have become one. What he needed was a friend.'

Gently slowly nodded. 'Then?'

'Then we heard that wretched siren. Something seemed to click in Eric's face and he jumped up and rushed out of the cottage. We ran too. Phil was shouting, telling him not to be a fool. When Phil was nearly up with him, Eric put the gun to his head and fired.'

'Where were you?'

Ka Stoven sat silently, her eyes closed, quite still. Then she drew back her head and faced Gently. 'By the gate.'

'You could see what happened?'

'Yes. I saw Eric fall. Phil knelt beside him. He picked up the gun. Then he jumped up and waved me to go in.'

'And did you?'

She nodded. 'I went behind the hedge. But I could still see what was going on. I

saw Dick come running out. He stood staring down at Eric.'

'What else did he do?'

'Nothing that I saw. But I'm told he took a photograph.'

'Why didn't you see that?'

'He had his back to me. Phil didn't see it, either.'

'Where was Mr Rushmere?'

'He was hiding in the bushes. He didn't know it was Dick, until I told him.'

'Go on.'

She looked away, frowning. 'Then we had to decide what to do. Whether, if we went to the police, they would condescend to believe us.'

'Quite obviously you decided they wouldn't.'

'Well, Eric was shot with my gun. And when Dick saw the body the gun was missing. Then there was the money to suggest a motive.' She smoothed her thigh. 'I wanted to report it, but Phil argued it would get me into deep trouble. And it was safe to cover up, since Dick didn't know Eric, and the police were unlikely to trace him to Grimchurch. Poor Eric had no relatives, of course. I was probably his nearest to a next of kin.'

'That must have been a comfort to him.'

She snatched her head. 'There wasn't really much time to spend arguing. Dick had obviously gone off to tell Lionel, so we had to get Eric away quickly. Phil got my car out. I fetched a towel to stop Eric bleeding in the car. We got him into the back and covered him over with a rug. Then Phil tidied up where he'd been, and we drove poor Eric to Phil's place. We put him in Phil's boot and drove on down to the reserve. That was our alibi, of course – that we were watching birds at the time.'

'And later Rushmere – interred – the remains?'

Her stare for a moment was smouldering. 'Phil also read the burial service over them. He buried Eric in the small hours of Sunday morning.'

'What about the gun?'

'What of it?'

'Why didn't he get rid of that too?'

Her shoulder moved. 'It got left in my car. I didn't find it there till Wednesday. Then I was on my way to Sussex, to spend a few days away from this mess. Also, to drop the money in London. We didn't want it traced back here.'

'So . . . where is the gun?'

'I hadn't time to be clever. I simply threw it in the loft. No doubt you'll think me naive for keeping it, but it *was* my gun. Daddy gave it to me.'

Gently nodded. 'Then you drove away to Sussex . . .'

'Yes, to my printer's. Phil thought it wisest.'

'What brought you back, Miss Stoven?'

She eyed him wonderingly. 'The papers. Did you think I'd leave Phil to face it alone?'

She wrote her statement and signed it, after a few hesitations on the count of style. Throughout the interrogation she had never once changed colour or made a nervous move or gesture. Now she capped her pen and rose with the same mindless poise.

'Are you charging me?'

'That will have to be considered.'

'Does that mean I'm free to go?'

‘It doesn’t mean you’re free to leave the district. Otherwise we’ve done with you for the moment.’

She paused delicately. ‘And Phil?’

‘His case will be considered too.’

Her gaze was level. ‘He’s been under great strain. He may not have known the nature and quality of his acts.’

Poker-faced, Gently nodded to the door. ‘And while you’re at it, steer clear of those pressmen! If you still have friends you’d better stay with them, until you’re less of a hot property.’

‘I’m staying with the Middletons. Dick invited me.’

‘Then give him my sincere respects.’

Miss Stoven left, and one of the policewomen went out to order refreshment. About them, the private room exhibited the disorders of a day of battle. Ashtrays were over-flowing, papers scattered, beer mugs deposited on the piano. Inside the door, a delta of mud spoke of the traffic of many feet.

‘Tea and muffins all right, sir . . .?’

Aspall was sitting deep in thought. Not till he’d got round a dripping muffin did he venture communication. Then he sighed.

‘I don’t know, sir . . . there’s something in what she said about the nature and the quality.’

‘What you do now is your affair.’

‘I know, sir. But I would like your opinion.’

Gently dabbed his chin. ‘Forget the harbouring charge. You’re never going to make it stick.’

‘But the concealment, sir?’

‘That’s different. It can go according to book.’

‘What’ll happen about that, sir?’

Gently hunched. ‘It rather depends on the bench! I’d say a suspended sentence for Rushmere, and a wigging for Miss Stoven.’

Aspall drank tea in a meditative way, the cup lingering at his lips. When a policewoman handed him the muffin dish, he selected one mechanically.

‘You know, sir,’ he said. ‘This is what I reckon. Neither one of those two is going to get off, really. He’ll have a dicky arm for life, and she can see where it happened from her bedroom window.’ He stared at the muffin. ‘And they’ve both got to live with it. What she was telling us just now. I can’t see them staying on in Grimchurch, not with memories like that around the place.’

‘But she’s a tough one, sir,’ the policewoman said. ‘She won’t be bothered by the view from her window.’

‘She isn’t tough,’ Aspall said. ‘She’s cool. The sort it hits hardest underneath.’ He kneaded the muffin. ‘What do you reckon, sir?’

‘I reckon she’ll write a poem,’ Gently said.

‘Well yes, I daresay, sir . . .’

Aspall bit the muffin. A moment later, he was reaching for his handkerchief.

And it was dark again over the reserve, where the chopper had not disturbed the avocets, and dark along the shore, where the makers of footprints had departed. And the two cottages, they were dark, and dark the trackway through the wood, along which, like the sound of silence, brushed the phantom of a churchyard owl. It rowed

across the garden of one of the cottages and through the unleaved elms beyond; then, white and large, it flickered along hedges where the mice squeaked and hedge-pigs roamed. Alone among birds it waked and hunted, alone: it had no mate.

APPENDIX

Ka's sonnets

1

As one, as two, our gypsy hearts together
Sing kindly part-songs on a holiday,
Plucking from frosty month green summer weather,
And chiding longest hour for his brief stay.
The brown field smiles, the rusting heath makes merry,
The wasting boughs new-woven garlands win them;
The croaking field fare dotes upon a berry;
I have your eyes, you mine, and a world in them.
No after or before, no sun or season,
No wish beyond, no asking or receiving;
The trembling leaf that falls falls without reason;
The flower keeps faith, though never yet believing. Meeting bright joy is, parting our shared sorrow: So much do hearts from hearts their own grace borrow.

2

When through the columned woods we softly went,
Where auburn brocade chambered in the sky,
Where antlered kings their gold and copper spent
In resinous air, sweet-musting drifts to lie;
When, by the ling's last flower, and weeping pine,
And mossy hassocks where the quick thrush feeds,
Came we, to watch beneath us dully shine
The sea-swelled river, bending through her reeds;
Then seemed I in some richer self to grow
And clearer being, borrowed from young time,
As though these blazon trees and current slow
My dreaming, unsung blood began to rhyme. Foundlings are we, strayed children of forgetting, But souls not single, nor of single setting.